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STORIES FROM INDIAN CLASSICS

By

V. KRISHNASWAMI AIYAR

Translated from Sanskrit

By

P. SANKARANARAYANAN

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INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS
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GENERAL EDITOR'S FREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 1.75.*

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

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* Since raised to Rs. 2.50.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita* by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata:* "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women, and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, QUEEN VICTORIA ROAD,
NEW DELHI:
3rd October 1951.

K. M. MUNSHI

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

Indian Culture has always upheld the practice of Dharma both in individual and social life. From king to commoner, the ascetic and the aristocrat, gods and men, even bird and beasts, everybody has stood by *swadharma*. Their motto has been in the words of Gita: "Even death in the practice of *svadharma* is to be preferred to another's *dharma* however well it may be performed."

The stories narrated in this book have been translated from the Sanskrit Puranas and are illustrative of the rule of dharma in the lives of the men and women in ancient India. They have been selected from a Sanskrit compilation known as *Aryacharitam* brought out by the late Shri V. Krishnaswami Aiyar who was Judge of the Madras High Court and later, Member of the Governor's Executive Council. The circumstances leading to this compilation are interesting and they are narrated in the Preface to the book written by the learned judge. The same is reproduced separately. His observations are as true today as they were when they were written sixty years ago — perhaps more relevant now than ever.

These stories in their English rendering were serialised in the *Bhavan's Journal* and they have now been collected together in this book.

Extracts from the Preface to "Aryacharitam" by Sri V. Krishnaswami Aiyar

The idea of making such a collection as this was first suggested by the now famous Convocation speech of Lord Curzon* wherein he challenged the ideals of the Indian people glorified in the literatures of their country, scattered in volumes of enormous bulk, some of them even unprinted and practically inaccessible to most even of those who have a knowledge of the sacred language of India. They could not easily be quoted in refutation of His Excellency's strictures. Many of his hearers and most of his readers felt that the attack was undeserved, but could make no effective reply except an indignant repudiation of what they felt to be a piece of gross injustice. It is not pretended that the collection is exhaustive. But its purpose will have been achieved if it brings home to Indians and foreigners alike that the country has no need to be ashamed of the ideals of life and conduct, held up to the admiration of the people by the literary genius of its greatest men.

The problem of the moral and religious education of the youth of this land has been repeatedly pressed upon the attention of the public. Various solutions have been attempted. All are agreed that no copy-book maxims inculcated by the teachers will strike a responsive chord in the minds of their youthful pupils. The biographies of great men, especially of those who have adorned the annals of the country's past, are bound to train the conscience and character of the young at an age when good impressions are calculated to produce the most lasting benefits. Examples of truth, of self-denial, of heroic self-sacrifice, of womanly chastity, and of high filial duty are calculated to capture the imagination and guide the conduct of boys and girls who now receive instruction merely in the secular learning of the west.

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* Lord Curzon observed in his convocation speech that the Hindus had no sense for truth and morality.

A Christian Missionary once asked me what were the ideals which have guided the Indian people in the past. It was easy to give the answer that to the Indian, life was a sacrifice. All the acts of his life, all the avocations he pursues and all the pleasures and rewards he seeks are associated with the consciousness of a religious background which is a preparation for suceeding lives. The missionary wished to know whether there were any stories which illustrated and enforced this need. It is hoped that this present volume will supply the answer.

The time is well suited for the appearance of this volume when there is an awakening of a national consciousness. The cry of love for motherland, which seems to be the expression of a new national life, is a call to all who have hopes of a great future of their country to join in the noble work of blending in a common unity the deversified peoples of India on the basis of a heroic past the memories of which still live amongst us. No nation has ever achieved greatness with a contempt for its past.

The stories of heroes and martyrs, of sages and saints are the necessary fuel to the flame of national life and national enthusiasm. India has great reason to be proud of her past, for men and women have been born in the course of her long and ancient history whose feats of arms, whose love for humanity, whose ideal lives and whose splendid self-sacrifice have been unto this day a lesson to the world. We Indians have every cause to cherish them and, in the love of their greatness and their goodness, to kindle in every Indian breast a new longing for national unity as a foundation on which may be bulit a new greatness.

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1. THE TRIUMPH OF TRUTH

Long ago, in the Treta Yuga, there ruled over Ayodhya a king named Harischandra who scrupulously observed the inviolable code of *dharma*. Once it so happened that he unwittingly offended the Sage Vishwamitra who threatened to lay his curse on the king's devout head. In expiation, the Sage demanded of the king the gift of a large amount of *dakshina* for a sacrifice that he intended to perform. Subordinating prudence to generosity, Harischandra agreed to the demand. What is more, he had his kingdom with its entire treasury at the feet of the sage. Quickly accepting the kingdom with all that it contained, Vishwamitra bade the king leave his domains taking only his wife and son with him.

As Harischandra was about to step outside the borders of Ayodhya, the *rishi* reminded him of the *dakshina* that he had promised earlier and insisted that he should not move without fulfilling his promise. 'A plighted word,' said he, 'should not be broken. That is the ancient law.'

Harischandra pleaded: 'O Sage! Having given away my entire kingdom to you, I am left with nothing to call my own save the bodies of my wife, my son and myself. Bear with me for a while and I shall redeem my promise before long.'

'How long should I wait?' asked Vishwamitra.

'In a month's time,' replied the king, 'I shall discharge my debt to you.'

'Well, go; but keep your word,' said the sage reproachfully.

Taking unwilling leave of his subjects, who were sore distressed to see the fate that had descended on their king, Harischandra wandered far from his dominions and entered the sacred city of Banaras. No sooner did he set foot on that holy soil leading his wife and child than he saw the Sage Vishwamitra himself approaching him with a grim countenance. Greeting him with due respect, he prayed to be told what the sage desired.

'The stipulated month is over. Give me this day the *dakshina* that you promised,' said the sage.

Harischandra replied in great humility: 'Holy One! This is the last day of the month; half of the day still remains. You shall have your *dakshina* before nightfall.'

'I agree to that,' said the sage, 'but take care that you keep your word, or else my curse shall fall upon you.'

Harischandra was lost in thought as to how he was to find the large amount with which he could redeem his promise.

'Where shall I go? Of whom shall I beg? If I do not keep my word, I shall be violating my *dharma*!' The king could not see a way out of his predicament.

Seeing her lord in sore distress, the queen tried to speak to him through her sobs and said: 'My lord! The wise extol a person who stands for Truth. There is no *dharma* higher than Truth. My lord! Have I not given birth to a son? . . . .' and she broke down unable to speak further.

Then steeling herself and gathering courage, she said: 'My lord! I have fulfilled myself as a woman; I have become a mother. There is nothing else that I desire. My life's purpose has been achieved. Therefore sell my person to some one and pay the *rishi* his due!'

'Alas! has it come to this?' wailed Harischandra. 'Shall I cast you off and barter you away as a tinsel put up for sale? How can you suggest this, queen of my heart?' he said disconsolately.

The little prince, whose name was Rohitaswa, afflicted by hunger, cried out, 'Mother dear, I am hungry; my tongue is dried up; give me something to eat.' How could the sweetly innocent child know of the plight of his parents!

The plaintive cry of his darling son sent a pang in Harischandra's heart. Overcome by anguish to hear his wife offering herself to be sold in slavery, he fell down in a swoon.

Just then, his eyes red with anger, Vishwamitra appeared again before him. Reviving the king, the *rishi* addressed him thus: 'O King, stand up and be a man. Wailing like a woman will not help you to discharge your debt. If you would uphold *dharma*, devise the means to free yourself from your debt. Stand up for Truth like a true king. The sun shines by Truth; the earth stands firm on Truth; Truth is the highest *dharma*. Heaven itself is rooted in Truth. A thousand *Aswamedha* sacrifices cannot equal Truth in merit. If you do not give me the *dakshina* you owe me before the sun sinks in the west, be prepared to receive my curse and the consequences thereof.'

In that predicament, the queen approached her husband and said, 'Lord! Do not invite the sage's curse. Heed my counsel. Sell me and pay him off.'

'Dear one!' said Harischandra, 'should it be even so?'

Suppressing his grief, the king cast off all his scruples. Standing in the market place, he cried aloud: 'Listen ye citizens of Banaras! Here stand I, the cruel, the inhuman one. Unabashed, I offer my wife for sale. Which among you need a housemaid to serve in your home? Take my wife and pay her price.'

Then, an old Brahmin appeared before the king and agreed to buy the queen as a servant for his wife. He brought the cash as the price of the queen, tied it to the king's raiment of bark and, taking possession of the queen, dragged her by her hair.

The little prince wept as he saw his mother being dragged away and tried to hold her back by the end of her apparel. Choking with grief, the queen begged of the Brahmin to let her console her child and take leave of him. 'Oh! How can I live without my child! When shall I see him again?' she cried. Turning to the prince, she said, 'Do not touch me, my darling. I am no more thine; I have become another's property'—and with that she collapsed.

Seeing his mother dragged away, the boy ran after her. The Brahmin got angry and began to beat him. But despite the punishment, the boy clung hard to his mother.

Turning to the Brahmin, the queen pleaded with him to buy her child also so that he could live with her. The Brahmin consented and took the prince paying his price.

As he saw his wife and child being led away, Harischandra wept. 'My beloved on whom the sun dare not shine, whom the wind could not touch, whom no stranger's eyes could ever behold is dragged as a slave through the streets of Banaras! That I should have consented and yet live to witness this humiliation! And thou my darling son! How heartless of me to have cast thee off!'

As the queen and the prince passed out of sight with the Brahmin, Vishwamitra demanded from Harischandra the money that he had received. The king promptly offered it to the sage. Finding that it fell short of what was due to him, the sage sternly asked for the balance.

'O Great One, I have sold away my wife and son!' remonstrated the king. 'I have nothing else left with me. Yet, wait for a little while and I shall pay you in full.'

'A fourth of the day still remains,' said the *rishi*. 'I shall wait till that time is over. But don't put me off again,' he warned and walked away.

Finding no other way to earn the money still due to the *rishi* except by selling himself, Harischandra shouted in the market-place, 'Let him who will buy me for his bondman, and let him hasten before nightfall!'

The Lord of Dharma appeared before him as a *chandala* in the hideous form of a keeper of the cremation ground, carrying a skull in one hand and a stick in another, and offered to buy him to be his servant. Overcoming his initial aversion to serve such a despicable master, this scion of the solar race of kings sold himself to him and paid the amount to the *rishi*.

When he took up his post in the cremation ground, the *chandala* instructed him in his duties. 'Your office here,' said he, 'is to wait for the corpses that will be brought here for cremation. Take possession of the shroud with which the body will be wound, demand the rice and cash due from the mourners, set apart a sixth of it for the king and three parts as my portion. The remaining two parts will be your wages.'

Harischandra stationed himself in that ghastly place lit by burning corpses where the air was rent by the wails of the kinsmen of the dead. Performing his duties amidst leaping flames and cracking skulls, the king's aspect too underwent a change as he went about with a shrivelled skin and matted hair, his whole frame smeared with the ashes of the burning ground. Grieving over his lot, he thought of the series of calamities that had reduced him to this lowly condition.

A twelve-month passed. One night, the enslaved queen herself entered the cremation ground carrying in her arms her own son, Rohitaswa, who had been bitten to death by a serpent. As she walked in weeping over her precious burden, Harischandra looked at the sweet face of the lovely boy, and was struck by the marks of royalty on his features. He wondered who might be the king whose darling prince had been snatched away by the cruel hand of death. When he heard the hapless woman refer to himself by name and complain against fate for the loss of his kingdom, separation from friends, and the sale of wife and child, he discovered that she was none other than his queen and the corpse on her lap was of his own son.

Then he wept piteously.

'Ah! What a stony heart I bear which does not break at the sight of thy charming face! Whom shall I kiss on the forehead hereafter now that thou art gone? When again will the dust of thy knees settle on my garment as I take thee up in my arms as thou hastenest to my side? Alas! thou wert flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone, but, wretch that I am, I sold thee away!'

When the queen discovered that the keeper of the burning ground was none other than her own lord and husband, she set up such heart-rending cries that the whole place reverberated with her lamentations. "O my dear lord!

Am I dreaming, or is it true that you have consented to this despicable office? If true, has *dharma* forsaken us? Has our worship of our household gods been in vain? Has *dharma* vanished from the world? Has Truth ceased to hold sway that you have been banished from your country and reduced to this pitiable plight?"

The royal mourners wept for long over the dead body of their beloved child. Then, addressing his queen, the king said, 'Let us both beg of the God of Death to take us too where our child has gone. Dear one, I do not wish to live long nursing this grief in my breast. But, alas! I am not a free man now. If I should fall into the fire and put an end to myself without the *Chandala's* permission, having been a slave of him in this life, I shall be his slave in my next life too. Or, for the sin of depriving him of this body of which he is now the master, I shall be consigned to everlasting hell.

'But how can I live without my boy? A man in distress cannot reason about right and wrong. So I shall throw myself into our child's burning pyre. You go back to your master's home and do your duties there looking forward to a reunion with me and with our child in the next life.'

The queen quickly replied, 'Best of kings! How can I live when both of you are dead? I too shall fall into the fire. Heaven or hell, we shall live together sharing our fate!'

The king made a pyre on which he laid his dear son. He and his queen raised their hands in devout supplication. He prayed to God to accept all three of them as offerings at the altar of Truth. He made ready to fall into the fire with his queen. Then a surprising thing happened.

All the gods of heaven came down to earth led by

Indra and the Lord of Dharma and gathered round Harischandra. Vishwamitra too was among them. The Lord of Devas approached him and spoke to him thus: 'We are pleased with you, O king, for your steadfastness to Truth and the stoic fortitude with which you bore all your trials. Look! Your son is restored to life. Here is the car to take you to heaven. Ascend and go to the regions of bliss with your queen and your son. Behold, your form has regained its former splendour. You are a true king.'

Harischandra replied: 'How can I go to the celestial regions without my subjects who are so devoted to me? If I should abandon them, I shall be guilty of a sin as heinous as killing one's teacher, a cow or a woman. I see no joy in living here or hereafter away from my loving subjects. If they can come with me, I shall go to your abode; else, I am content to remain here sharing their joys and sorrows.'

Indra pleaded: 'Your subjects have diverse merits and demerits. How can they go along with you?'

Harischandra remonstrated and said: 'What merit could I have earned except with their help? It is with their assistance that I performed my austerities and sacrifices. Whatever virtue I have acquired, let it be shared by them too. I am content to enjoy with them, even if it be for one day, whatever merit will keep me in your region for days without number.'

Pleased with his speech, Indra, Vishwamitra and the rest went with Harischandra to Ayodhya. They crowned Rohitaswa as the king of the country with great pomp and ceremony and Harischandra and his consort were duly led with those dear to him to the regions of the blessed, there to abide for ever.

[From the *Markandeya Purana*]

2. TRUTH IS DEARER THAN LIFE

There was a sacred river known as *Nandaa-Saraswati*. Once upon a time, Devavrata requested Paulastya to tell him how that river came to be called by that name. Paulastya narrated the following story.

There was a King called Prabhanjana who was constant in the observance of his Kshatriya duties. As was his wont, he once went to the forest on a hunting expedition. Seeing a doe behind a thicket, he hit it with his arrow wounding it mortally. At the point of death, the deer spoke to him and said :

"What a heinous act have you committed! You hit me when, with head bent down, I was suckling my young one fearing no danger from any quarter. I have heard it said that it is unrighteous to kill an animal which is feeding its young one, which is drinking water, which is asleep or which is engaged in love-play. You sent your missile at me when I was feeding my fawn. You are guilty of an *adharmic* act. In consequence you shall become a tiger roaming heartlessly in this jungle."

The King heard this curse which the deer pronounced on him. Trembling all over, and with folded hands, he said: "I was not aware that you were feeding your fawn. I hit you without knowing it. So I beg you to look at me with a kindly eye and forgive me. At least tell me when I shall be released from this curse. When will I regain my human form?"

The deer replied: "A hundred years hence you will meet a cow known as Nandaa. When you converse with her this curse will end."

In terms of the curse, the King instantly became a ferocious tiger bristling with sharp claws and deadly teeth and was terrible to behold. The King-turned-tiger roamed in the forest killing and eating animals and men that came his way.

Thus a hundred years passed.

And then, there came to the part of the forest studded with date trees a mighty herd of cows tended by a number of cowherds. The forest echoed with the deep bellows of the cows and the noisy chatter of the cowherds. Among the cows was one Nandaa by name, the best and most stately of them all. Of well-proportioned features and majestic mien, it proudly walked at the head of the herd as one born to lead.

Before long, however, enticed by the luxuriant growth of green grass that grew far afield, it strayed far away from its fold. Losing its way it reached a hill known as Rohita, by whose side there flowed a stream of cool water. All round the hill was a dense forest infested with wild beasts which had their lairs in the caves which abounded in that fastness. Among the denizens of the forest was a tiger of enormous might and fearful appearance.

Seeing the unattended cow walking in front of it, the tiger commanded it to stop and sprang on it with intent to plunge its claws into its hide.

Said he, "How fortunate that you have chosen to come of your own accord as my food today!"

Nandaa heard these terrible words of the tiger and was rattled. Her thoughts flashed back to her young one, white like the very moon itself. Overpowered by her love and concern for her offspring, and despairing of ever seeing her child again, she began to moo and sob piteously.

Seeing her weep, the tiger spoke to her harshly: "Why do you weep? Don't you see that the gods have sent you here today to be my food? Weeping or laughing, you cannot go back alive. So why weep at all? Tell me if you have anything to say. I am eager to hear."

Nandaa the cow replied: "My obeisance to you. I know that none who falls into your clutches can ever escape. I do not grieve over my death at your hands, for, whatever is born must die; and everything that dies must be born again. So, lord of beasts, I do not bemoan the inevitable. Even the gods are helpless in this and they too must meet their fate. Hence, I am not the only one who will die.

"And yet, my grief springs from my attachment. Listen to what afflicts my heart. I have a calf, the first to be born to me. He is still in his infancy and lives on my milk; he has not grown old enough to feed on grass. He lies helpless bound to the cowpen and will be looking for me to feed him when he becomes hungry. When I think of him I am overcome by grief as to how he will live when I am dead. Just for once, I wish to suckle him. Having fed him with my milk, and after caressing him I wish to entrust him to the care of my friends and teach him about the good and the bad and how to get along in life. Then, I shall come back to you and you may make a meal of me."

The tiger replied: "Why do you care about your child? Know you not that you are about to die? Every creature is dreadfully afraid of me and none goes back from my jaws with his life. Out of the tenderness of your heart, you speak piteously of your child. Don't you know that no son or austerity, no gift, no mother or father, no friend can rescue one who is fated to die? I cannot believe that when once you get back to your fold, you will come again to this place. Every part of me is itching to drink your blood."

Upon this, Nandaa the cow said: "O lord of beasts! Listen to my words. I have but recently given birth to my first child. Let me go. I shall have a last look at my mates, at my dear child, and at the cowherds. I shall bid farewell to them all and especially to my mother. I swear to you by everything that is sacred that I shall surely return. Pray, let me go just for a while.

"Listen! If I do not keep my promise, if I do not come back, let me be visited with the most heinous of sins. May the sin of killing a holy man, of killing one's mother and father descend on me. Let me share in the sin of the avaricious, of the scum of society and of those who poison others. If I do not come back as promised, may I be guilty of violating the sanctity of a cowpen, of kicking one who is asleep. May I be guilty of marrying to another a girl who has been once wedded to a person. May the sin of a preferential treatment of one of two wedded wives light on me if I do not come back to you. May I be guilty of sending back a friend without fulfilling his wish."

Inclined to trust the cow who swore in such terrible terms, the tiger said:

"Though I would fain believe that you would keep your promise, when you go back, you may perhaps say to yourself: 'I have deceived this fool of a tiger.' Others may dissuade you from going back. They may say there is no sin in violating a promise made on oath in specific circumstances; that a plighted word may be broken to a lady in love, in the affairs of a marriage, in saving a cow and when one is in danger of losing one's life. Fools believing they are wise people may confuse your own mind with specious arguments. Like the landscape painters who delude the onlooker making level ground appear high and low, clever people may make the worse appear the better reason.

"This is an ungrateful world. Generally a benefactor is not remembered with gratitude. Even a calf gives up its mother if she runs dry. To achieve their objects, *rishis*, *devas*, *asuras* and men generally seal their compacts with an oath. Even when one makes a true oath in the presence of God, or of fire or of his *guru*, the god of death takes away half his merit. And so, do not break your promise in the belief that you have deceived me. You yourself have spoken the sacred law. Now, do as you please."

Nandaa replied: "Noble one! It is as you have said. But, who can deceive you? He is himself deceived who tries to deceive another."

The tiger said: "Gentle one! Go; see your dear child; pour your milk into its thirsty throat; lick him with all your maternal love. Take leave of your mother and your brother, of your friends and kindred. Be true to your promise and come back quickly."

Having thus made the promise to the tiger and swearing upon everything holy to abide by it and permitted to go back, the cow hastened to her fold panting eagerly for her child. Tears streaming from her eyes, she was the picture of unspeakable agony. Hearing from a distance the bellow of her dear child, she dashed to his side and eagerly rubbed her face against her offspring from side to side.

The calf looked at its mother, and saw the tears flowing from her eyes. Much perturbed, the calf queried: "Mother, you are much agitated; your look is as of one afraid. You appear unhappy. What is the reason?"

Nandaa could not muster courage to tell the truth, but asked her child to drink his fill from her udder and added: "Dear one! This will be the last time that you will drink of me. Alas! Having drunk of me now today, from whom will you drink on the morrow? I have come to you on a short reprieve having sworn to return to the tiger that is waiting to maul and make a meal of me."

Upon this, the calf replied: "I shall go with you where you go. Nothing will be more meritorious for me than to die with you. Even if I keep away from you now, I must die some day. If the tiger kills me along with you, I shall go to the celestial regions of those who are devoted to their mothers. And so, I must go with you to share your fate.

"Or, mother dear, you stay here. I shall go to the tiger keeping your promise. What avails me to live separated from my mother? Who will protect me rendered helpless when you are gone?

"For infants like me still in the suckling stage, none can take the place of the mother. None can protect them as a mother does. The mother is their sole refuge, in times of distress. The mother is the only friend; she is the true source of joy. The mother is the very god both here and hereafter. Those children who live by this supreme *dharma* prescribed by Brahma Himself, attain a glorious destiny."

Nandaa replied: "Dear child, do not think of going with me. It is to me that death has been ordained. None can take the place of one who is fated to die at a particular moment. This is my parting message to you, dear child.

Listen carefully to what I say and act accordingly. Do not be neglectful of your safety while you wander in the forest and along river banks. Creatures come to grief by lack of care. Do not be greedy to graze in dangerous spots. Greed brings about the ruin of people in this world and elsewhere. Those deluded by greed wander forth along oceans, forests and caves. Even the learned do wrong things impelled by greed. The world comes to ruin by greed, neglect and want of care. Hence do not be avaricious, do not be neglectful or too trustful.

"One must take the utmost care to protect oneself. One must guard against evil creatures and evil men. The mind of those living by themselves is liable to delusion.

"Do not trust any creature which has claws; beware of deep rivers. Avoid horned creatures and those who carry weapons of attack. One should be careful in dealing with women of inconstant minds. Servants should not be relied upon overmuch.

"One should not trust those who must not be trusted and even those who are trustworthy should not be trusted beyond measure. For, the credulous have reason to fear danger and wholesale ruin to themselves.

"Do not rely even on your own body. Do not confide in any one without due care and circumspection. Let your sense of smell ever guard you from danger. Cows see by their sense of smell as kings see through their spies.

"Do not remain alone in a forest. Be always intent on *dharma* and practise it scrupulously. Do not give way to grief that I am going back to die; for, death is inevitable to every one.

"What is life? Just as a traveller seeks the shade of a tree from the scorching sun, rests there for a while and then passes on, the soul takes a body for a brief period and then casts it off. Dear child! The whole world is impermanent. Why grieve for what will not last long? Hence abandoning all sorrow, abide by what I told you."

Then the cow sniffed at her calf and licked him on the head. Sighing heavily again and again at parting from her dear one, she felt as if everything about her was blank due to impending separation from her child. In the midst of her tears, she spoke again and said:

"Nothing can equal the love of a son; the home of a childless one is a terrible void. One who has not begotten a son lives to no purpose. It is by a son that one goes to celestial regions. A sonless person is consigned to hell.

"People say that the sandal-paste is very cool to the skin; but when one embraces one's son, one feels a cooling freshness far exceeding the sandal-paste."

Thus recounting the glory of having a son, casting a lingering look on her calf, the cow took leave of her mother, kindred, and the cowherds.

Nandaa said: "As I was wandering at the head of the herd, the lord of the forest pounched upon me. I was released from his hold on promising to return to him. I came to see my child, my mother, the *gokula* and my kindred. True to my promise, I am going back to the tiger."

Addressing her mother, Nandaa said: "Mother dear! Forgive me my transgressions. This is your daughter's son! What more need I tell you!"

Then turning to the other cows, Nandaa called them by their names and told them in plaintive tones: "Vipula, Champaka, Daama, Bhadraa, Surabhi, Maalini, Vasudhaara, Priyaa, Nandaa, Mahaa-nandaa, Ghatasrava, whatever wrong I may have done to you, knowingly or unknowingly, pray, forgive me, good ones; forgive all my faults. You are all of auspicious qualities; you are all mothers of all worlds; your bounties are without limit; bear with my little son. He is now helpless and unprotected, stand guard over him. Sisters all! Take special care of him lest he be consumed by the fire of separation from his mother. I leave him to your kind protection; look at him and nourish him as your own child when he is alone without me. Holy ones! Bear with me and I go back to keep my promise. Do not grieve over my fate; for death ever stands before one who is born."

Hearing these words of Nandaa, her mother and mates were overcome with grief. Surprised at her constancy to her promise, they said: "Nandaa! Self-protection should be the aim of every creation. If you go back to the tiger abandoning your child to his fate, you will be guilty of partiality to truth. Those who know the *dharma* have declared that in a crisis of danger to life, there is no sin in violating a promise. If a lie has to be uttered to save a life, the lie will become a truth. And, truth which endangers life will be a falsehood. In respect of the love-lorn, in marriages, to save a cow from danger and to rescue the holy ones, one need not stick to one's promise even though made on oath."

Nandaa said in reply: "I am prepared to utter a falsehood for saving the lives of others; but I shall not speak a lie for myself, even if it be to save my life.

"One gets into the womb alone; one is alone in death as in life. Joy and sorrow belong to one by oneself. No one can share another's fate.

"The universe is grounded on Satya. Dharma too is founded on Satya. The ocean keeps its bounds out of regard for Satya.

"Making a gift of the whole earth to Vishnu, Bali went down to the nether worlds. Though duped, yet he was steadfast to Satya.

"The Vindhyas were once growing up; as Sage Agastya went past it, he commanded it to cease growing. True to its promise, the mountain keeps to its limits even now.

"Heaven, liberation, *dharma*, all these depend on the truth of the sacred word. He who subverts the word, is ultimately subverted by it.

"If a man understands the *atman* differently from the words of the sacred text, what heinous sin will he not commit? The truth of the sacred text is inviolable. He who seeks to violate it is verily a thief who deceives himself. Of such a one the god of death annexes half his *dharma*. I shall not consign myself to deadly hell deceiving myself in this way.

"Satya is like a river. Its waters are deep and pure. Forbearance is a pool in that river. Bathing in that pool, released from all sins, I shall attain a superior state.

"When one weighs a thousand *asvamedha* sacrifices against Satya, Satya will always prove heavier.

"Satya is the best penance. It is also the easiest; one need not strain oneself to observe it. It is the treasure of the gentle folk. It is the inheritance of the good. It is superior to all *ashramas*. It is the most spontaneous virtue of men and it is their natural adornment. Observing it, even a fallen one goes to Heaven. How can I give it up?"

Nandaa's mates observed: "O, Nandaa! You are worthy of receiving the obeisance of even the celestial beings. For, to keep our plighted word, you are determined to give up your life so dear to every one. Your constancy to *satya* brings everyone in the three worlds within your reach. No more do we grieve over your separation from us or from your dear child. For the women of auspicious mind, no harm can come from any quarter."

Casting a lingering look at her mates, and going round the entire herd, preparing to go back, Nandaa addressed with devout humility the Earth, the Rain, the Fire and Wind, the Moon, the Lords of the ten Directions, the Trees, and Stars and the Planets, and said:

"Ye, holy ones living here, and the divine guardians of the forest, pray protect my child.

"Listen, ye, flowers of diverse hues and forms, and ye stately trees of the forest, listen to my prayer! When my child roams alone in these places, protect him as tenderly as you would your own child.

"Bereft of his sire and mother, alone and unprotected, afraid and afflicted by hunger and thirst, when my child cries piteously in these regions seeing the whole world blank, I beg of ye, take pity on him and guard him from all harm."

Appealing to the denizens of the forest in these terms, overcome by the prospect of separation from her offspring, despairing of seeing her child again, Nandaa felt acutely distressed like a *chakravaka* bird bereft of its mate. She looked almost lifeless, like a creeper fallen from the tree. She walked back with unsteady steps like a blind man who has lost his stick.

She came back to where the dreadful tiger was waiting for her.

Just then, with uplifted tail the calf came galloping to her side and stood before the terrific beast.

Nandaa saw her child on one side, and on the other was the deadly tiger.

Addressing the tiger, Nandaa said: "Lord of the jungle! I have come back to you, true to my word. Eat your fill out of my flesh; feast on my body. Drink my blood to your heart's content. And after I am dead, *but not before*, eat this calf, my dear child, if you will."

The tiger said: "Welcome, gentle creature, you have kept your promise. Nothing untoward will happen to those who are constant to Truth. I gave you leave to go back just to test your sense for Truth. Else, can any creature escape my jaws? By the very Truth to which you are constant, you have now been released from death.

"Hereafter, you are sister to me; and your calf is my sister's child. And, sinner that I am, you have taught me a holy lesson. I have learnt from you that the worlds are established in Satya and that Dharma is based on Satya. By the power of Satya do streams of milk flow from the cows to be used as sacrificial offerings.

"He who lives by your milk is indeed most fortunate. Fortunate are the meadows whereon grows the grass on which you feed.

"I am amazed at your fidelity to Truth. I do not wish to live henceforth pursuing my evil ways. I wish to be purified of my sins. Alas! How many thousands of helpless animals have I killed and eaten! What will be my fate hereafter? I have been a sinner, given to evil deeds; I have been heartless and cruel. I shudder to think of the hell to which I shall be consigned.

"So, I shall try to expiate my sins visiting holy places. Or, I shall fall down from a mountain; I shall immolate myself in fire and put an end to my life.

"Gentle one, teach me how I may get rid of my sins and tell me quickly; for, time is running out."

Nandaa said: "*Tapas* is extolled in Krita Yuga; in the Treta Yuga, *Jnana* and *Karma* are said to be efficacious;

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sacrifices are the means to salvation in Dwapara Yuga. But in the Kali Age, *daana* is the only sure means. Of all the gifts, assurance of *abhaya* to all creatures is the greatest and the best. He who grants *abhaya* to everything moving and unmoving, is freed from every cause of fear and attains the Supreme.

"There is no gift equal to *ahimsaa*, no penance higher than *ahimsaa*. All virtues are inherent in *ahimsaa* even as every foot-mark is covered by the tread of an elephant.

"Therefore, all *dharmas* are covered by *ahimsaa*. *Ahimsaa* is the shade of the tree of Yoga; Heaven and Liberation are its fruits. Those who are victims of the threefold afflictions seek its life-giving shade. They are no more subject to any grief; for, under it, they attain supreme peace.

"This, in brief, is the great teaching which I have conveyed to you. But, why do you seek it from me? You know it already."

The tiger said: "Cursed by a deer, I have now taken this form. Preying upon other creatures, I have forgotten everything. Your words have brought it back to my mind.

"By the power of Truth which you hold so dear, you will surely attain a noble destiny. But, one more question, dear one. By contact with you, I recall that a hundred years have passed since I was cursed to be a tiger. I have been instructed in the truth of Dharma which is the way of the good. Tell me, auspicious one, what is your name?"

Nandaa replied: "My master is called Nanda; he used to call me Nandaa. But why do you tarry? Make your meal of me."

The moment he heard the name Nandaa, the king regained his human form released from his curse. He stood there as a King with might and mien.

Meanwhile, the Lord of Dharma came to see Nandaa, the truthful and said: "I have come here drawn by your absolute devotion to Truth. Ask for the best of boons that you can think of."

Nandaa replied: "Surely, by your grace, I shall attain a high destiny. May this river which flows here be hereafter known by my name as *Nandaa-Saraswati* and may it dower good people who bathe in it with all that they may desire."

Then Nandaa went to the regions of those who ever abide in Truth. Prabhanjana too went back to his kingdom.

This is the story, said Paulastya, of the origin of the name *Nandaa-Saraswati* to this holy river. And, since then it has been flowing southward purifying these regions.

[From the *Padma Purana*]

3. THE SPRINGS OF PROSPERITY

Envious of the prosperity of Yudhishthira and his brothers, Duryodhana once addressed his father Dhritarashtra thus: "Great sire, Yudhishthira holds glorious court in Indraprastha in the midst of plenty and prosperity. Every day he feeds ten thousand learned Brahmanas on golden platters. His countless wealth and riches fill me with an overpowering remorse; for who will look with equanimity on the prosperity of one's enemies?"

Dhritarashtra replied: "My son, if you wish to attain to an opulence equal to or even greater than that of Yudhishthira, acquire a noble character. Even the three worlds can be conquered by one's character. Mandhata obtained rulership of the earth overnight; Janamejaya in three days and Nabhaga in seven days. There is nothing that a man of character cannot secure."

Duryodhana asked: "Father, I wish to know how such character (*seela*) is acquired by which one can conquer the whole world."

Dhritarashtra replied: "Listen, my son, to this ancient story narrated by Sage Narada."

Prahlada annexed the domains of Devendra by the force of his character and made himself lord of the three worlds. Thus dispossessed, Indra went to his Preceptor Brihaspati, and with due humility, begged him to teach him the means by which he could attain spiritual excellence (*sreyas*). Brihaspati taught him the means and said that if he pursued it steadfastly, it would lead him to *shreyas*.

Indra queried how that path would lead him to *shreyas*. Brihaspati replied: 'Learn about it from the Asuraguru Sukracharya. He will explain it to you.'

Upon that, Indra approached Sukracharya. The latter directed him to Prahlada who, he said, was better equipped in the matter.

Happy to hear it, Indra went to Prahlada in the guise of a Brahmana and begged him to teach the path to *shreyas*.

Prahlada put him off saying: 'I have no time now to instruct you. I am fully occupied with the administration of the three worlds.'

The Brahmana pleaded: 'Teach me, pray, when you have the leisure; I seek you as my supreme preceptor.'

Pleased with the earnestness of the Brahmana, Prahlada taught him highest wisdom, choosing an auspicious hour. The Brahmana received it with due reverence and humility; and then, inquired of him how he obtained lordship of the three worlds.

Prahlada replied: 'I am never conceited that I am King; I do not treat the learned and holy ones with derision. Listening to their words of wisdom, I discipline myself and give liberally. They speak to me in confidence and I let myself to be guided by them in all things. They establish me safe and secure in the path of *dharma* as the bees confine honey in the honeycomb. I have conquered anger and my senses are under my control.

'Thus I live in the company of those whose speech keeps pace with their understanding, delighting in the nuances of knowledge. The words of wisdom coming from the lips of a learned person really make for *shreyas*'.

Pleased with the Brahmana's service, Prahlada offered him a boon and bade him ask whatever he wanted.

The Brahmana said: 'Royal sire, if you are so pleased with me, and would give me anything that I would seek. I wish to obtain from you the gift of your character. Give me your *seela*.'

Taken aback by this request of the Brahmana, the King was beside himself for a while. Yet, a promise was a promise, and a boon granted could not be revoked. He made a gift of his entire *seela* to the Brahmana who went away from his presence with that precious treasure.

Prahlada was sitting brooding over what had happened. At that time a spirit of superlative lustre emanated from his body.

Prahlada asked: 'Who are you?'

It replied: 'I am *seela;* you have divested yourself of me. I am going from you to reside in the Brahmana to whom you have given me away.'

It then disappeared into the body of Indra who had received it as a gift from Prahlada.

No sooner had that spirit gone than another like it arose and came out of Prahlada's body.

'Who are you?' asked Prahlada.

'Know me to be *Dharma,*' replied that spirit. 'I am going to that Brahmana to tenant his person; for, I reside where there is *seela*.'

Then a third spirit too came out of Prahlada's body as if it would consume everything by its splendour. Upon Prahlada asking it, as before, 'Who are you?', it replied: 'I am Truth or *Satya*. I go today in the wake of *Dharma*.'

When *Dharma* left, there came out another spirit from the King's body. In reply to the King's query, it said: 'I am Conduct (*Vritta*); I reside where there is *Satya*.'

When *Vritta* too had gone, a great noise arose from the King's body. When asked, it said, 'I am strength (*bala*);

I am inseparable from *Vritta.*' So saying, it too disappeared.

Then, a lustrous woman of great divinity came out of Prahlada's body. He asked her 'who are you?' And she replied: 'I am *Shree;* I am everything that makes for whatever is auspicious and for prosperity. I have been residing in you this long. Abandoned by you, I go away following strength and valour.'

Prahlada got really afraid and he anxiously asked: 'Where do you go, noble lady? You are divinity itself. Tell me who is this Brahmana who came to me?'

Shree replied: 'That Brahmana is the very lord of the *Devas:* he is Indra. Taught by you, he has deprived you of the lordship of the three worlds. You are well versed in all the laws and practices. You conquered the three worlds by your *seela.* Learning that secret, he has divested you of it and has the virtues of *Dharma, Satya, Vritta, Bala* and ultimately, he has annexed me also. For all these virtues spring from *seela* and we all reside only where there is *seela.*'

"No wonder, my son," said Dhritarashtra addressing Duryodhana, "that Yudhishthira is so prosperous; for, he possesses an extremely noble character; his *seela* is absolutely beyond reproach."

Then addressing his father, Duryodhana said: "Best of the Kauravas ! I wish to know the truth of *seela.* What are the means to acquire it?"

Dhritarashtra briefly instructed his son in the secret of *seela,* and said: "In thought, word and deed, one should refrain from evil to every creature. Beneficence and bounty are the marks of *seela.* One should not do what may injure another or whatever one would feel ashamed of. One should do only that which evokes praise in the assemblies of holy ones. This, in a nutshell, my son, is the essence of *seela*.

"Maybe some people not wedded to *seela* are prosperous in the world. But their prosperity will not last long; for its roots are neither deep nor strong.

"Knowing this, my son, acquire the virtue of *seela* if you wish to attain a measure of prosperity greater than that of Yudhishthira himself."

[From the *Mahabharata*, Santi Parva]

4. THE GLORY OF SACRIFICE

King Yudhishthira, the eldest of the **Pandavas**, once performed the Asvamedha sacrifice. It was a grand affair gone through in right royal fashion. Everybody was more than satisfied with the bounties conferred during the course of the sacrifice. All the foremost of the Brahmanas, kinsmen, relatives and friends, the poor, the blind and the helpless were all gratified by gifts made in profusion. The king received loud praise from every one. Flowers rained on his pious head in recognition of his generosity.

Then a wonderful event happened. There appeared in the concourse a blue-eyed mongoose with one side of his body turned into golden hue. It spoke with a voice of thunder and said:

"O King! The *yajna* that you have performed and of which you boast in such immoderate terms is nothing in comparison to the simple food given away by a liberal Brahmana of Kurukshetra who lived observing the *unccha vritti.*"

Everybody was astonished to hear these words of the mongoose who spoke in a human voice. They gathered round him and asked:

"Whence have you come and who are you? Why do you speak so slightingly of his sacrifice which has been performed so perfectly according to rule? Nothing that should be done has been left undone here. Those deserving to be worshipped have been duly honoured. Libations have been poured into the sacred fire as ordained in the *Saastras* to the accompaniment of proper *mantras*. Gifts have been made with humility and with no pride. The regenerate classes have been propitiated in a proper manner. Just battle was given to the Kshatriyas for accepting Yudhishthira's overlordship. The manes of the dead ancestors have been satisfied with prescribed rites. The legitimate desires of all women have been gratified. Every one among the gods and men has been pleased. The remnants of the sacrificial material have been distributed to all and sundry and it has been a perfect *Yajna* in every way. How then do you speak so slightingly of it? You appear intelligent and your words demand credence. You appear celestial in your form. Tell us what you observed to be deficient in this sacrifice."

In answer to their query the mongoose replied with a smile on his face:

"It is no untruth that I have spoken. Never have I spoken in pride. In spite of all the munificence displayed in this sacrifice, I must yet affirm that it is not equal to the gift of a few handfuls of powdered barley.

"Listen as I unfold to you the tale of what did really happen in Kurukshetra and how one half of my body was turned there into gold.

"O! It was a wonderful thing that happened there. I witnessed it myself and it concerns a poor but generous Brahmin who lived by *unccha-vritti*, and as a result of what he did, went to heaven along with his wife, son and daughter-in-law.

"He was a Brahmana living in Kurukshetra. Like the pigeons picking the corns after the harvest has been carried away, he used to glean a few corns of barley from the field and support his family with the flour made out of it.

Pure of conduct, constant in *dharma*, and of stern self-control, he was the embodiment of true nobility. Austere in their habits, he and the members of his family used to take their food only late in the day. If there was nothing to eat on a day, the family would go without food and eat only at the same time next day.

"Once a great famine overtook the land. This poor Brahmin's family had nothing to eat. The herbs too had all dried up. The family went without food. This occurred day after day. They were all in great distress.

"One day in the month of Jyeshta, when the Sun was high up in the sky, this Brahmin was picking up corn from the fields unmindful of the scorching heat. He succeeded in gathering a small quantity of barley. His wife and daughter-in-law made it into powder and made a dough of it.

"After finishing his oblations and austerities and after worshipping at the sacrificial fire as ordained for a *grahastha*, he had the dough (*saktu* as it was called) divided into four parts.

"As they were about to sit for their meal, in came a Brahmin as their guest. Happy at the sight of a guest, they received him with every mark of hospitality. He was given a seat and then he was queried about his welfare. Of transparent simplicity and righteousness, every member of the family was free from malice or wrath. They told him of their lineage and ascertained his ancestry from him; and then, the poor householder addressed the guest and said:

" 'Here is some *saktu* acquired in a lawful way. Deign to accept it to appease your hunger.'

"The Brahmin accepted the food which was Brahmin's share and ate it with relish. But it was not enough to satisfy his hunger. Seeing his guest still hungry, the Brahmin stood perplexed as to how to feed him to satisfaction.

"Then the wife turned to her husband and said: 'Give him my share, my lord! Let him eat it and go from here after a full meal.'

"But the householder would not agree to this suggestion. He saw that his wife was making a great sacrifice. She was but skin and bone, her life almost hanging by a thread. Bent with age, she was shaking all over. Old and weak, she was exhausted by intense austerities.

"Addressing her, he said: 'O beautiful one! Even worms, insects and animals are mindful of the safety and welfare of their female partners. How much more should I be mindful of you! The wife treats her husband with kindness; she feeds him and she protects him. Every religious rite, all sources of pleasure, and all means of wealth depend on the wife. If a man fails to protect his wife, he loses his good name, incurs infamy and goes down to hell. So, how can I consent to your parting with your share of this food and let you starve and waste away?'

"But the wife would not listen and she pleaded. 'Please do give my onefourth share to the guest. You and I are partners in religious life. For every merit and pleasure, the wife depends on her husband. In secular as in spiritual life, we function together. And, to a wife, her husband is the highest deity. It is through his grace that the wife gets a son and becomes a mother fulfilling her womanhood. You protect me and so you are my *pati;* you give me the means of sustenance and hence are my *bhaktaa.* So, in return for all this that I have received from you, when you yourself, weakened by hunger, worn out by fasts could part with your share, why should I not give up mine?'

"Unable to resist his wife's arguments, the householder consented to offer her share of the meagre food to the guest who ate it with great eagerness, but still remained ungratified.

"Then the son approached his father and said: 'Oh! best of men! Give my share of the barley to the guest. By this, I am sure I shall earn great merit. Mine is the duty to protect you in your advancing years. I must keep you alive to perform your penances. Seeing that you are not able to fulfil your duty of hospitality to this guest in full measure, you would feel wretched and unhappy for having failed in your *dharma*. This consciousness of your lapse may prey on your health and hasten your end. I must stand between you and this eventuality and prevent it by helping you to complete your service to our guest. So, take my portion and give it to him.'

"The householder replied: 'Even if you are a thousand years of age, my son, you are still a child to me. I know the pangs of hunger that a child would feel. Though I am old, I shall somehow manage to hold my life-breath. You are a growing child and you need nourishment to become healthy and strong. Old and decrepit as I am, I am accustomed to starve and I can suffer hunger. And, I am not afraid to die. *You* must not starve.'

"The son replied: 'I am your offspring. The *saastras* call me *putra* as, by my birth, I rescue you from the hell of a childless person. It is declared that one's son is one's own self reborn. So, rescue yourself by your own self in the form of your son.'

"The father was pleased with his son's words. 'You take after me in form and feature, in conduct and in restraint. It shall be as you desire.'

"With this, he offered his son's portion to the guest who ate that also. Even then his hunger was not appeased.

The poor householder felt that he had nothing more to give and felt confounded.

"The daughter-in-law now appeared before them in this predicament. Bringing her share of the flour, she begged her father-in-law to feed the Brahmin with it. She said: 'Noble sire! Through your son, I shall obtain a son. You will go to the regions of the blessed by virtue of your grandsons whom I shall raise by your son. Thus, the father, the son and the grandson make a triple whole of domestic felicity even as the threefold sacrificial fires of the home dower one with spiritual merit. And, it is my duty to present you with a grandson for your glorification and also help you to discharge your obligations of hospitality. So accept my one-fourth share of the barley to our honoured guest.'

"The householder tried to put his daughter-in-law off by saying: 'Seeing you wasted by wind and sun, your complexion lost and your frame emaciated by your austerities, how can I have the heart to deprive you of your food? Woe unto the home where the daughter-in-law is not treated properly. You are a child afflicted by hunger and you deserve to be protected by us. I cannot bear to see you worn out by fasts!'

"The daughter-in-law stood firm by her resolve to offer her share to the guest. She said: 'My husband is my god. You, as his father, are god to him. Hence you are the god of my god. If I live, it is only to save my gods, my husband and your good self. My sole joy lies in serving you and assisting you in the due performance of your duties. So, allow me to offer my portion to the guest.'

"Praising her for her sense of duty, the father-in-law took her share of the barley to the Brahmin who ate it and felt satisfied.

"The Brahmin was the God of Dharma in disguise. Pleased with the hospitality of the Brahmin and his family at the cost of such a sacrifice, he praised them to the skies and said:

" 'Your gift is pure and obtained in the most righteous manner. The very gods in heaven proclaim the glory of your gift. Lo! See how they rain flowers on your head in admiration of your gift which has no equal. The denizens of Brahmaloka are eager to welcome you to their regions. By your noble deed, all your dead ancestors have been pleased and they have attained salvation. Your children and children's children, generations of your progeny yet to be born will reap the benefit of your priceless *daana*. You gave with earnestness and with a pure mind and a loving heart. By your pious deed in the extremity of your starvation, you have earned an everlasting place in heaven.

'Hunger will cloud the understanding; it will destroy the sense for righteousness. Confused in mind, the hungry man loses his fortitude.

'But he who conquers hunger, surely goes to heaven. He who is inclined to make gifts stands secure in right conduct.

'Unmindful of attachment to your son or to your wife, you have held the sanctity of a gift above everything else. You did not give in to the promptings of natural feelings.

'To earn wealth is good; but better than that is to offer it to a deserving person. Still more important is to give at the proper time when the gift is most needed. More than all, the gift must be preceded by *sraddhaa*, humility and devotion. Such a *daana* alone earns the highest merit.

'The door to heaven is hard to find. Thoughtless men of indifferent faith cannot know it. The door is bolted with greed. Desires stand guard in front of it. It cannot be unbarred easily. It will open only for those who have conquered anger and controlled their passions.

'Heaven's door can be seen only by those of great penance who give without any mental reservation. He who gives away a hundred having a thousand, he who gives ten having a hundred, and he who gives but a handful of water having nothing, all these earn equal merit. King Rantideva, bereft of all his wealth, gave a small quantity of water with a pure heart and obtained great merit and went to heaven. *Dharmadevata* is pleased not so much with costly gifts of great value as with things of no value but given with a pure and compassionate heart, with faith and devotion.'

'King Naaga gave a thousand cows to the holy ones. But among them was a cow which did not belong to him and that was the cause of his fall.

'Sibi gave the flesh of his own body to protect a sparrow in fear of imminent death by a hawk which claimed it for its prey, and he is now rejoicing in heaven.

'Mere wealth acquired by oneself does not make for a man's glory. Sacrifices, however properly performed, cannot by themselves dower a man with lasting merit.

'The efficacy of a gift is annulled by anger, and greed bars the way to heaven.

'The merit of your gift of this barley dough is infinitely greater than what will accrue by many *Rajasooya* sacrifices or *Aswamedhas* performed in great munificence. By your humble, but, sincere gift you have conquered Brahmaloka itself. Your fame will resound for ever in the world.

'Behold! The celestials are waiting with their divine cars to take you and your family to their happy regions.'

"The Dharmadevata ceased. The Brahmin thereupon ascended the aerial car with his wife, his son and his daughter-in-law and went to the superior worlds.

"Then I," continued the mongoose, "who had been witnessing all this from my hide-out came out of my hole. Attracted by the flavour of the flour which had dropped down through the fingers of the guest, I rolled on the ground wet with the waters of hospitality and strewn with the petals which fell on Brahmin's head. And lo! half my body became golden.

"Wishing to get the other half also golden, I repair to the haunts of ascetics and the palaces of kings and frequent places where great *yajnas* are performed.

"Hearing about this sacrifice performed by Yudhishthira, impelled by my desire, I came here and rolled on the ground in the hope that the other half of my body also would turn into gold. But alas! that did not happen.

"Hence it is that I said that this sacrifice, grand and glorious though it was, could not equal the *saktu-prasthaana-yajna* of the pious Brahmin of Kurukshetra."

And, saying this, the mongoose disappeared leaving his hearers in wonder and bewilderment.

[From the *Mahabharata,* Asvamedha Parva]

5. CHAKSHUSTEERTHA

On the southern bank of the Gautami river, there is a holy spot known as *Chakshusteertha*. There is an interesting story respecting this *teertha*.

A king named Bhauvana ruled over a city of the same name flourishing on a hilltop. In that celebrated city lived an old Brahmin of the Kusika clan. He had a son named Gautama. The infidelity of his mother had affected his character though he was learned in the Vedas and Sastras.

Gautama had a friend, Manikundala by name, who was a Vaisya. Gautama was poor, but Manikundala was rich. The poor Brahmin and the rich Vaisya soon developed an incompatible friendship.

On a certain day, Gautama accosted his friend in private, and said: "Let us go abroad across mountains and seas in search of wealth. Youth is the period of life for enjoyment and let us not waste these years of our youth."

Kundala replied: "Great is the wealth that my father has bequeathed to me. What need have I of more wealth?"

Gautama argued: "Who can be content in respect to *dharma*, wealth, wisdom and sensual desires? Every man wants always more of these than he ever has.

"All creatures subsist on what they have acquired themselves. Hard is the life of those who live on what others may give to them.

"Dear is that son to his father who does not desire any patrimony, but is prepared to live on what he himself earns.

"He lives who lives on what he has gathered by the labour of his hands and does not touch his father's wealth.

"He alone is worthy to be called a son who makes over his self-acquired riches to his father and to his kinsmen. Others are but uterine vermin!"

Hearing these words of the Brahmin, the Vaisya set out with a capital of his precious wealth. Manikundala said: "Let us go forth to trade in foreign lands, and we shall return gathering wealth in plenty." He did not, however, know Gautama's deceitful nature.

And so, both of them left their homes without the knowledge of their parents. Many were the countries that they passed through in quest of wealth. All the while, the Brahmin was scheming to defraud his friend out of all his riches.

He told himself: "I shall get all that wealth from the Vaisya by some means or other. Many are the pleasure-spots in the world peopled with divinely beautiful damsels. With this wealth that I shall acquire from my friend, by fair means or foul I shall let myself go, enjoying their dance and music and lead a life of absolute abandon to my senses."

Indulging in these thoughts, and with a smile on his face, Gautama said to Manikundala: "My friend! It is only by practice of *adharma* that men attain prosperity and happiness. Is that not so? Those who stand by *dharma* invariably come to grief. So what avails *dharma* which leads only to unrelieved sorrow?"

"No," said the Vaisya, and added: "Happiness is founded on *dharma. Adharma* which is sinful leads to fear, grief, poverty and weakness. Where there is *dharma*, there is liberation. Would a man ever perish who is intent on his appointed *dharma?*"

The argument led to a wager by which it was agreed that he who lost should part with his wealth to him who won it. They agreed to refer the dispute to the passersby. Addressing those whom they met, they said: "Tell us truly, which is more powerful, *dharma* or *adharma*."

Those whom they questioned replied: "Those who pursue the path of *dharma* suffer in the world; the evil ones prosper."

The wager went against Manikundala, and he made over his wealth to the Brahmin. And yet, he kept on extolling the greatness of *dharma*.

The Brahmin was surprised and asked: "Do you still consider *dharma* worthy of pursuit?"

"Yes," affirmed the Vaisya.

"I have annexed all that you possessed, my friend," replied Gautama, "and still, unabashed, you speak in praise of *dharma*. See, I myself have conquered *dharma* and go forth to live as I please."

Hearing these words of the Brahmin, the Vaisya retorted: "I look on those who do not respect *dharma* as chaff among grains and as a mere clay model of a bird. Of the four *purushaarthas* which behoves a man to strive for, *dharma* is the first and foremost. Then only follow *artha*, wealth, and *kaama*, desire. When I still stand steadfast on *dharma*, how do you say that you have conquered *dharma*?"

The Brahmin replied: "We shall again refer our dispute to the men of the world. And this time, our arms shall be the wager."

The Vaisya agreed. They both approached those whom they met and put the question to them. They too replied like the others and declared that *dharma* and misery went together.

"I have won!" cried the Brahmin and cut off the arms of the Vaisya.

"Do you still praise *dharma*?" the Brahmin demanded.

The Vaisya stuck to his conviction and said: "I hold that *dharma* is absolute and I am prepared to proclaim its greatness even if I am on the point of death. *Dharma* is the mother of every man; it is his father, his friend and his kith and kin."

Disputing thus, the Brahmin in possession of all the wealth and the Vaisya divested of his arms, and bereft of his wealth, wandered far till they came to the banks of the Gautami Ganga conversing with each other.

The Vaisya continued to talk in praise of the Ganga, Yogeswara and *Dharma*.

The Brahmin got angry and retorted: "You have lost your wealth; your arms have been cut off and you are left barely with your life. If you differ from me still, I shall sever your head with this sword."

None the worse for the loss of his arms and his riches, still smiling, the Vaisya affirmed: "I still maintain that *dharma* is superior; do as you please. He who speaks ill of the learned ones, the teachers, the gods, the Vedas and the Supreme Being, is a sinner and should not be touched. The reviler of *dharma* is to be shunned as the evil one."

Upon this, the Brahmin said in anger: "If you still keep on praising *dharma*, we shall hold our lives in wager and refer the dispute to others again."

"Agreed," said the Vaisya.

And the worldly men whom they met answered like others before them that *dharma* did not go with happiness.

Gloating in his success, the Brahmin plunged his knife into the Vaisya's eyes and pulled them out. Adding insult to injury, he exclaimed: "Look! My friend, see to what pass your praise of *dharma* has brought you. You have lost your wealth; your hands have been cut off and now you have lost your eyes. And I go forth happy. Do not sing the praise of *dharma* after all this."

When the Brahmin had gone, the Vaisya lost in thought, exclaimed: "What a fate has befallen me despite my constancy to *dharma!*"

Still faithful to *dharma* and with unabated fervour, but greatly agitated and groaning in anguish, he sat on the ground exhausted and unable to move.

It was the eleventh day of the bright half of the month. At the end of the day, as the silver moon was filling the sky and the earth with her radiance, Vibhishana, King of Lanka came to that spot, attended by his sons and *rakshasa* subjects. After bathing in the holy Ganga, he proffered devout worship to Yogeswara on the bank of that sacred river.

Vibhishana's son, the reflection of his father, and himself called after his father as Vibhishani beheld the Vaisya sitting disconsolate at that spot.

In reply to the Prince's query, the Vaisya narrated to him his doleful tale. The Prince told it to his father. Hearing it, the King said: "In times of yore, Hanuman, my friend, most dear to Rama, whom I worship, brought for some purpose a mighty hill full of medicinal herbs. One among them was known for its power to heal all wounds and the other would restore the dead to life. His purpose over, Hanuman went back to the Himalayas to replace the hill in its place on the mountains. As Hanuman was hurrying back, the healing herb fell down on these banks of the Gautami river near the temple of Lord Yogeswara. Now, my son, bring that herb, and praying to God, place it on the heart of this man. Surely this good man will get all that he desires."

Vibhishani said: "Quickly, my father, pray show that herb to me.

"There is nothing more meritorious in the three worlds than removing the distress of others."

Vibhishana pointed the tree to his son who immediately cut off a branch from it. Vibhishana desired him to place it on the heart of the Vaisya, adding that as soon as it touched his body, the man would regain his original form and features.

Hearing this, Vibhishani did as he was told and placed a twig of the tree on the Vaisya's breast. The Vaisya immediately regained his arms and eyes. Who does not know the efficacy of talismans, charms and medicines?

The Vaisya dipped into the Gautami Ganga, worshipped at the shrine of Yogeswara, made his supplications to those gathered there, and, taking the twig in his hands, wandered through the great city.

The King of that city did not have a son. But he had a daughter whom he brought up as a son. She had lost her eyesight. The King had caused it to be proclaimed that whoever restored the eyesight of the Princess, be he a Deva or an Asura, Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya or Sudra, be he good or evil. would be given the Princess in marriage and would also succeed to his kingdom. This was proclaimed aloud day and night.

The Vaisya heard it and said: "I shall surely restore the Princess's sight." He hastened to the King's presence and, no sooner was the twig placed on her body, than the Princess got her eyesight back.

Filled with wonder and gratitude, the King asked the Vaisya who he was. The Vaisya told him his story and said: "By the grace of the Brahmanas, by the power of *dharma* and the strength of my austerities, by virtue of the gifts I made and the sacrifices I performed, by the merit of the largesses that I distributed and by the power of the divine herb, I was able to work this miracle."

The King was filled with amazement and joy when he heard what the Vaisya told him. "This is a noble person," said he, "of superior virtue and excellence. Else, who can obtain this great power? And so, I shall give my daughter to him, preceding it by the gift of my kingdom."

Thus making up his mind, the King dowered the Vaisya with his dominion and his daughter.

Going out for recreation, the Vaisya was filled with an overpowering sadness. Without his friend Gautama, he felt forlorn and the joy of royalty had no glamour for him. He was ever thinking of his Brahmana friend and could not delight in his new-found fortune. For, that is the nature of good people in the world. Even to those who do them injury, they are merciful and kind.

The old king went to the forest, entrusting the kingdom to the Vaisya. Manikundala now became the King.

One day he met the Brahmin Gautama forlorn and unhappy, his entire wealth lost in a game of dice. Manikundala took him to his palace and honoured him with due hospitality. He spoke to him about the sanctity and value of *dharma*. He made his friend bathe in the Ganga to get rid of his sins.

Along with the Brahmana, Manikundala invited his kinsmen and those of his friend, and performed a number of *yajnas* near the temple of Yogeswara and worshipped the gods. And, in due time, he went to heaven.

From that time onward, this holy spot came to be known as *Chakshusteertha*. Devoutly remembered along with God Yogesa, it gives mental peace and happiness to those who bathe in it and destroys everything that is evil.

[From the *Maha Purana*]

6. A DHAARMIC DUET

There was once a fowler who was wandering in a forest looking out for birds that he might shoot with his arrow. Of wicked nature, he was terrible to see. Black as a raven, he had bloodshot eyes and looked like the very God of Death. His legs were long and his feet were short. His mouth was large and his cheek bulged out. He had no friend or kinsman. Everybody kept away from him disgusted with his evil ways. For, the wicked ones who kill other creatures without compunction should be avoided like a poisonous serpent.

Capturing the birds of the forest caught in the net which he used to spread out, he used to sell their meat and earn his living. Thus did he live for many years untroubled by any consciousness of his sinful conduct. Long habit had blunted the edge of his conscience and dulled his sense for a virtuous life. And thus, he spent his days happy with his wife.

One day, as he was wandering in the woods in quest of birds, there arose a great storm which threatened to uproot the trees. The sky was overcast with dark clouds and tongues of lightning leaped from side to side. And then, it poured heavily deluging the earth, and in a moment, it was a vast sheet of water everywhere.

The fowler was filled with unspeakable dread. Shivering with cold and trembling with fear, he roamed listlessly through the forest. In vain he looked about for a dry spot. Every path and every eminence was under water.

Many a bird fell down dead blasted by the wind and rain. The wild animals roamed about alone or in packs filled with fear and looking out for a shelter. Cold and shivering in every limb, the fowler could neither stand nor move.

In this plight, he beheld a female pigeon on the ground stiff with cold. Sinner that he was, though himself in a similar plight, he picked up the bird and put her in his cage. Accustomed always to evil ways, the evil one could not refrain from evil even in such distress.

And then, he saw closeby a tree taller than the rest. Countless birds had flocked to it for refuge from the fury of the weather. It stood there in its lordly height like a good man intent on giving succour to those in affliction.

Soon, the sky cleared and became spangled with myriads of stars, looking like a magnificent lake with lillies booming on its bosom. Looking at the blue sky studded with stars, the fowler turned his steps homeward still shivering with cold. He saw that the night was far advanced; and his home was a long way off. So, he resolved to spend the night under the tree. Making a bed of the leaves that lay strewn about, he stretched himself to sleep resting his head on a stone.

Meanwhile, the male pigeon that had made his nest on a branch of that tree was in intense anguish that his mate who had earlier gone out in quest of food had not returned though it was so late in the night. 'It has been a terrible storm,' he lamented, 'and my dear wife has not yet come back. What could have happened to her? Is she free from any harm? Without her, my nest appears empty.'

'Though filled with sons and grandsons, daughters and daughters-in-law, with servants and others, a householder's home is still empty if there is no wife. The house by itself does not deserve that name. It is the wife that makes the home. A house without a wife is verily a wilderness.

'If my wife of ruby eyes, of bright plumage and sweet voice does not return, what use is my life to me? Constant in her duty, she would not eat if I have not eaten; she would not bathe till I have bathed. She would not sit before I have sat down or lie down to sleep till I go to bed.

'Sharing my joys and sorrows, she would feel forlorn when I am away and she would turn my wrath by her gentle speech. Devoted to me, her lord, and resigning herself to me, she used to be ever intent on my welfare. Fortunate is he who has a wife like mine. One can revel in the joys of a sweet home with such a wife though living at the foot of a tree. Without her, life even in a palace will be dark and dreary.

'The wife is a true helpmate in the pursuit of *dharma*, *artha* and *kaama*. She is the trusted friend when one travels away from home. She is said to be the richest possessions of her lord. A man comes alone into the world and leaves it alone. During his sojourn in it, his wife keeps him faithful company.

'In disease and distress, there is no friend like a wife; there is none like her who can give a man solace and comfort. There is none so dear like the wife, no refuge like her in the world. And in doing acts of *dharma*, none can stand by a person and help him so dutifully like his wife.

'He who has not a wife at home who is good by nature and pleasant of speech, let him betake himself to a forest; for there will be no difference for him between his home and a wilderness.'

The she-pigeon in the fowler's cage heard these lamentations of her lord and she said to herself:

'How fortunate am I that my lord speaks so highly of me whatever be my nature, good or bad! She is no wife whose husband is not pleased with her. If a woman's husband is satisfied, then that gives satisfaction to all her gods. Her lord is the highest god to a wife because she has been married to him before the sacred fire. That wife with whom her husband is not pleased becomes consumed into ashes even like a flowerladen creeper in a forest fire.'

Reflecting like this, despite her affliction in the fowler's cage, the she-pigeon spoke to her woe-stricken mate:

'Listen, my lord,' said she, 'to my words and act on them to obtain merit. Be thou, dear one the rescuer of a supplicant. Here lies this fowler and sleeps at your door. His limbs are stiff with cold and he is tired and hungry. Do unto him the offices of hospitality.

'To let a supplicant die of cold and hunger at your door is a sin as heinous as killing a pure good man or a cow which feeds the world.

'Clear is the *dharma* that we of the pigeon-tribe should pursue, and you know it. So, stand by it. We have heard that he who performs his appointed *dharma* to the extent of his powers goes after death to regions of supreme bliss.

'Thou hast sons and progeny and there is nought else of earthly goods for thee to secure in this life. So give up attachment to thy body. Offer what is due to this fowler so that his heart may be pleased. That way thou wilt earn merit and thy life will be truly purposeful.'

Thus did the she-pigeon speak from her captivity and cast longing glances at her lord.

The male pigeon heard what his mate said. Pleased with her words so wise and of such *dhaarmic* import, and tears of joy flowing from his eyes, he resolved to honour the fowler showing him every hospitality. Addressing the bird-slayer in terms of due humility, the bird said: 'Welcome, guest, welcome this day to my abode. I shall wait on you. Tell me what you will have me do. Do not grieve or stand on any ceremony. This is your home. Tell me quickly, what I may do for you; what is your desire? You have sought refuge under me and so you are dear and sacred to me.

'Even an enemy must be received with hospitality when he comes to a person's house. The tree does not withdraw its shade from him who comes to cut it. He cannot live happily in this world nor attain salvation in the next who fails in the duties of hospitality.'

Hearing these words of the bird, the fowler replied: 'Protect me from this cold which freezes my limbs.'

Thereupon, the pigeon carried a small dry twig to a place where there was a fire, lit the twig with it and carried it back to the foot of the tree. Collecting the dry leaves, he set fire to them and made a big fire.

'Warm yourself in this fire without fear from any quarter,' said the bird to the fowler.

Warmed and refreshed, he spoke to his winged host and asked for food to appease his hunger.

The bird replied: 'Alas! I have not stored anything which I may give you to eat. We of these woods live on what we gather for the day. Like the ascetics of the forest we live from day to day without keeping anything for the morrow.'

And yet, the bird felt sad and cursed itself that it was unable to appease the fowler's hunger.

Soon rousing himself from his melancholy, he told the man: 'Wait just for a while; I shall satisfy you.' Kindling the fire into a bigger blaze, with joy beaming through his eyes, he exclaimed: 'I have heard it from the *rishis*, the *pitrs* and the gods that honouring a guest is a most meritorious act. Amiable one! Confer your blessing on me. Verily, my heart is set on worshipping my guest.'

Steadfast in its resolve and with a joyful face, the bird went thrice round the fire and fell into it intending that the fowler might eat its flesh thus cooked in the fire.

The fowler saw what the bird did, and stood amazed. 'What is this that I have done?' he pondered. 'Greatly have I sinned and invited dire reproof.' And he felt very guilty indeed.

Reproaching himself, he said: 'My mind has been wicked and I have committed a heinous sin.

'This noble bird has taught me a great lesson. He sacrificed his life at the altar of *dharma*.

'Henceforth, I shall abandon everything, my sons and my wife and even my life. Profiting by the example of this bird, I shall renounce all pleasures. I shall wear myself out like a shallow tank in the summer heat.

'I shall bear hunger and thirst; I shall endure the scorching rays of the sun; I shall starve my flesh by fasts and feed my spirit by penances to make myself eligible for higher worlds.

'Hereafter I shall pursue the path of *dharma*; for *dharma* is the way and the goal. I shall follow the lead of the pigeon and practise *dharma* even as he has done.'

The fowler threw away his staff, his iron-hook, his net and the cage; he released the she-pigeon from the cage and went forth to roam about in the world and determined not to turn back from his high resolve.

After he left the spot, the she-pigeon, who had been set at liberty, thought of her lord and husband and cried out disconsolately in the extremity of her grief:

'I do not remember even one occasion, my dear lord,' she wailed, 'when I have displeased thee. Miserable is the lot of a widow though she is mother of many sons. Bereft of her husband, she becomes an object of pity for her kinsfolk.

'Thou hast ever cherished me with love and affection and thou hast always held me in great esteem. Thou didst use to speak to me most endearingly as we sported together on hill and dale, in the springs of rivers and on tops of trees. We used to soar together in the sky in felicitous companionship. Alas! Gone are those joys now!

'Limited are the gifts that a father, or a brother, or a son can confer on a woman. Her husband alone dowers her with unlimited plenty. Who or where is the woman who would not adore her lord?

'There is no protector to a woman as her husband. Where can she find happiness except in her husband? Even abandoning everything else, she should find refuge in him.

'What is my life worth when thou art gone? Would a noble wife wish to live after her husband is dead?'

Lamenting like this, she plunged into the blazing fire and immolated herself in its flames.

Then she beheld her lord shining in ethereal splendour, riding on a celestial car, adored by noble personages. She joined her husband on the chariot and they both ascended to Heaven.

The fowler saw all this from a distance and he said to himself: 'I too shall strive to attain this state by my austerities.' He went forth with no thought of food or shelter. He gave up all earthly ties. As he wandered forth, he saw a beautiful lake full of colourful lotuses and lovely water-fowl. Though he felt acute thirst and intense weariness, he controlled his mind and desisted from slaking his thirst or bathing his limbs in the inviting waters.

He penetrated into an adjoining forest infested by beasts of prey. Lacerated and torn by thorns and bleeding all over, he went on and on unmindful of whatever happened to him. Not far off he saw a blazing fire which enveloped the entire forest and consumed everything in its dreadful course.

The fowler ran towards the devouring conflagration. He plunged headlong into it. It turned his frame into ashes and with it burnt away all his sins and purified his soul. And then he found himself in Heaven.

[From the *Mahabharata*, Santi Parva]

7. DHARMA *Versus* DHARMA

Once there was a king called Avikshit. He ruled over his kingdom for long and he was a good king. When he grew old, he entrusted his kingdom to his son Marutta and betook himself to the forest with his wife to lead the life of a *vaanaprastha*.

Marutta was an able ruler like his father, not swerving from the path of *dharma* and ever mindful of the welfare of his subjects. He was bold and valorous, skilled in the use of every *sastra* and *astra*. True to the obligations of royalty, he performed various *yajnas* and freely gave away enormous wealth as *dakshina*. His subjects were mightily pleased by his bounties and they themselves were constant in the observance of the duties relating to their station and status in life.

And thus all was well in every part of the king's domains till, one day, his father's mother who was leading the life of an anchorite in the forest sent him news of a great calamity that had befallen the *rishis* doing penance in the forest.

She said in her message: 'Your grandsire went to Heaven after ruling his kingdom, earning great merit. Your father has gone to the forest to lead a spiritual life. I am here doing penance. But what is this that I learn that brings ill-repute to you? This is not how your grandsire and your own father conducted the affairs of State. You seem to have lost yourself in sensual pleasures. Do not your spies report to you what happens in the four corners of your kingdom? Else, how can you be unaware of the iniquities perpetrated in your land? Now, listen if you do not know it yourself. The serpents of the *paatala-loka* came out of their hide-outs and plunged their fatal fangs into seven sons of the *rishis* here who now lie dead. Not only that. These fell serpents have wrought havoc in the sacrificial grounds, polluting them with exudations from their bodies. I do not know if they did all this because these *naagas* have not been propitiated for long by worship proper to them. But, whatever it was, it is a most unrighteous act that these have been guilty of, killing innocent and unoffending *rishiputras.* These *rishis* themselves could have burnt them to ashes by the power of their *tapas;* but they feel that punishment of the wrong-doer is not their office and that it behoves the king to do it. Remember this, my child: He who is born to a king can indulge in pleasures only till a crown settles on his head. The moment the waters of his *abhisheka* into royalty are poured over him, then begin his cares and anxieties.

'Now that you are king, you must be all eyes and ears. You must be able to distinguish between friends and foes. You must choose your ministers with care and you must be watchful for ever to make sure of the loyalty of those about you. You must gather news of your people as to who among them are intent on *dharma* and who are not. You must find out who deserve to be punished and stretch your arm unflinchingly at them. You must find out who needs protection and take him under your care. Your spies must be very vigilant to gather news from every quarter and you must set others to spy on these spies. Thus devoted to the offices of your State, you must remember that the instrument of your body is not for seeking pleasure, but to strive hard, day and night, to discharge your duties properly.

'Therefore, my child, who are now king of this land, abandon the quest for pleasure. Subject yourself to every hardship to rule your kingdom with absolute regard for righteousness. Kept in ignorance of what has happened, you are not aware of the sad plight of these *rishis*. Yours is now the duty to punish the *naagas* who have fatally bitten these *rishiputras*. You will be entitled to your share of the one-sixth of the *dharma* of your people only if you protect the good and punish the wicked. Else, all the sins of the wicked people will be on your head. I have spoken now; do as you please.'

The king heard this message from his grandmother and was touched to the quick by this accusation that he had failed in his duties. He felt extremely vexed with himself. He went at once to the hermitage of that worshipful lady and fell at her feet. She blessed him most heartily.

Then, Marutta beheld the seven *rishiputras* lying dead on the ground and he was very distressed at that sight. Lashing himself to indignation, he said: 'Now, let all the worlds peopled with men, gods and *asuras* witness how I shall take revenge on these *naagas* for the heinous crime that they have committed.'

So saying, he lifted his mighty bow and yoked it with the *aagneyaastra* for the destruction of every serpent inhabiting the regions below. Then there arose a mighty fire which, even ere the *astra* was discharged enveloped every part of the *naagaloka* and nothing could contain it. The *naagas* ran for their lives here, there and everywhere, crying aloud to father, mother and child to escape the dread terror. The tails of some of them were aflame; the hoods of others were caught in the conflagration, and, in desperate confusion, giving up their ornaments and their apparel, all of them issued out of the nether world and sought refuge at the hands of Marutta's mother.* For, once upon a time, she had given them promise of help in times of distress.

Going to her, filled with fear, the *naagas* fell at her feet. In a voice choked with agony, they reminded her of her promise of succour and said: 'Now has the hour come, great mother, to redeem your promise. Pray give us *praanabhiksha*; bid your son stay his hand. The fire emanating from his *astra* burns out the entire world of the *naagas*. In this plight when your son is determined to exterminate us, you are our sole refuge.'

Marutta's mother heard this plaintive appeal of the *naagas* and turning to her husband, Avikshit, she said: 'My lord! These serpents have come here in distress unable to bear the raging fury of Marutta's arrow. They are seeking refuge in me. Their *saranaagati* to me is, by implication, made to you as well; for, we are two-in-one in the pursuit of *dharma*. Therefore, go and speak to your son Marutta to desist from this cruelty to the *naagas*. Surely he will stay his hand when he learns that you and I jointly bid him do so.'

Avikshit replied: 'Our son is furious that these *naagas* have been guilty of a great sin. I am afraid he cannot be turned from his resolve.'

The *nagas* entreated: 'We fall at your feet and pray for *abhaya*. Be merciful to us. Kshatriyas carry a bow and arrows to save others in distress; is that not so?'

Avikshit heard what the *naagas* said. Agreeing to his wife's desire, he told her: 'Well, my dear, this instant I shall go to our son for the protection of the *naagas*. Verily, those who have sought refuge should not be abandoned. If he does not pay heed to my words and persists in his purpose, I shall oppose his *astra* with mine and prevent him from killing the *naagas*.'

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* In Hindu Mythology, serpents are personified after the manner of human beings and are spoken of as *naagas*, as living in families and as having adornments and attire.

Taking up his bow and accompanied by his wife, Avikshit went to meet his son.

The son saw his father wielding his mighty bow and the terrific arrows waiting for his command to spread universal destruction.

Avikshit spoke to his son and bade him restrain his anger and withdraw his *astra* from the bow.

Marutta looked at his father again and again, saw him displaying his bow and arrows as if ready to give battle. Courtesying to him humbly, he replied: 'While I am king, unmindful of my authority, these serpents have killed the seven *rishiputras*. They have polluted the waters and ruined the sacrificial altars. They have committed an unpardonable sin for which they deserve to be punished. Do not prevent me from punishing them, my dear father. If I do not punish them, I shall go to hell for failing in my duty.'

'But, my son! These have sought my protection. So, for my sake, out of respect for me, withdraw your arrow. Enough of your anger.'

'No. I shall not forgive these evil-doers who have sinned greatly. How can I agree to what you say? To do as you bid me will be to violate my *dharma*. Is it not the duty of a king to visit the wicked with punishment and protect the good? So doing, he goes to holy regions after death. Otherwise, he goes to hell.'

Marutta was firm in his resolve and refused to yield though his father and mother pleaded with him most earnestly. Seeing that he would not withdraw his *astra* from its death-dealing flight, Avikshit got angry and said:

'You are bent on killing these terrified *naagas* who have sought refuge in me. You would not heed to my request. Then, take up my challenge. You are not the only bowman on this earth. I too have *astras* not inferior to yours. Stand up and show your valour.' With this he fitted the terrible *kaalaastra* to his bow.

And then, the two *astras* of the father and the son were poised against each other prepared for deadly combat and threatened the whole world with complete destruction.

Marutta beheld his father's terrible aspect, his fingers toying with the *astra* which would spell instant death. Facing him, the king asked: 'Protection of my subjects is the duty prescribed for me. Would you kill me for performing my *dharma?*'

'But protection of those who seek refuge in me is *my* duty. How can I let you live when you are bent on preventing me from doing *my dharma?* Either you kill me in this combat and then kill these *naagas* as you please; or vanquishing you, I save these *naagas* from death at your hands. Fie on him who for any reason fails to go to the rescue of those who sue for help, even though they come from the camp of his enemies. I am a Kshatriya; these are in distress and appeal to me for help. I have promised to save them. How then can I refrain from slaying you if they must be protected?'

Marutta retorted: 'Be it friend or kinsman, father or teacher, if a person comes in the king's way of protecting his subjects, such a person deserves to be killed without compunction. Therefore, my father, I must fight against you. Pray do not be angry with me. I must stand up for my *dharma* and if I oppose you, it is not out of anger with you.'

So, they stood against each other, father and son each intent on killing the other. The *rishis* of the forest had gathered there in awful suspense of the issue of this strange combat. They told the son not to send his arrow against his father and they appealed likewise to the father to spare his son.

Marutta put them off by saying: 'My *dharma* tells me that I should destroy the evil-doers and protect the good. Is not that the duty of a king? Tell me, holy ones, is that wrong?'

Avikshit asked: 'Is it not the *dharma* of a person to save one to whom aid in distress has been promised? Is it not a crime to look on while one who has sought refuge is being killed?'

The *rishis* told the father and son: 'But listen, both of you, to what these *naagas* say.'

And the *naagas* said: 'We shall restore to life the *rishiputras* bitten by some of our tribe.'

Accordingly, they sucked back the poison from the bodies of the victims and the *rishiputras* stood up as before.

Marutta then fell at his father's feet in devout supplication. Avikshit embraced his son fondly and blessed him saying: 'Long may you rule over your kingdom; and may you see sons and grandsons and live happily for many many years!'

[From the *Markandeya Purana*]

8. SATI SUKANYA

There was a king named Saryaati. He was the son of Vaivasvata. He was a great and noble king. He had a number of daughters who were extremely handsome, beautiful in every way.

Among them was one, the best of them all, who was very appropriately called Sukanya. Darling of her father and mother, she always carried a smile on her face which heightened the loveliness of her features.

Not far from the city, there was a lake of crystal clear water like the Maanasa Saras itself. A flight of steps marked the way to it. Birds of diverse plumage, the hamsa and the chakravaaka, among them, lent a pleasing colour and an ethereal splendour to that spot. On the bosom of the lake grew lovely lotuses which spread out gaily in the morning sun.

Close by was a holy grove where the Sage Chyavana who belonged to the Bhaargava line spent his days in concentrated *tapas*. He chose that place for its solitude. Seating himself in a firm posture, controlling his speech and his breath, restraining his senses and refraining from food, not even taking water to quench his thirst, the *tapasvin* was engrossed in the contemplation of the Supreme Mother. And he sat thus—for how many days none could tell. Creepers began to twine round his frame and an ant-hill rose over him covering him whole and entire; and all kinds of insects and reptiles started infesting that spot. The sage became invisible under the mound of earth that grew over where he sat.

One day, surrounded by his consorts, King Saryaati came to the lake to spend a pleasant evening. His daughter Sukanya too was playing with her friends, and happened to stray into the *tapasvin's* grove and came to the ant-hill that had covered him. Looking into it from above, she beheld two tiny sparks emitting light like fireflies. Impelled by childish curiosity, she took a long thorn and sent it down the hole in the ant-hill.

The *muni* saw her from his place. The point of the thorn was directed towards his eyes. He cried out from inside: 'O thou of lovely face, I am a *tapasvin,* go away from here; do not poke into the ant-hill with your thorn.'

Sukanya paid no heed to the *rishi's* warning. 'What is this bright spot deep down in the ant-hill?' she asked herself. Trying to explore it, and impelled by an adverse destiny, she pricked his eyes with the thorn. And, then, she went back to join the king's party. Yet, she felt that she had done something very wrong and was touched by remorse.

Blinded by the thrust of the thorn, the *rishi* got enraged. Suffering extreme pain, he was the picture of misery. At the same moment, the king, his ministers and his entire retinue, even the elephants, camels and horses that came with him were all afflicted by a strange disease which caused them enormous anguish.

Everyone reported his plight to the King who himself was in similar distress. 'What may be the cause of this?' thought the King. Addressing his followers, he said: 'The Sage Chyavana lives in a hermitage to the south of this lake spending his days in contemplation. Did any one among you come in his way and offend him in any manner? I am sure we have incurred his displeasure and that is the cause of our present suffering. Tell me truly, who amongst you has interfered with him, knowingly or unknowingly and made him angry with us?'

The followers, everyone of them, denied that they had given the *rishi* any cause, by mind, speech, or act, for his displeasure.

The King was not satisfied. He was sore distressed in mind and he thought deep and long. He once again asked everyone of those who had come with him to the lake. He asked them gently, and by threat of dire punishment. And everyone averred that he was innocent.

Sukanya saw the grievous plight of the people and the anxiety of her father. Turning to him, she said:

"Playing in the outskirts of the lake, I saw a pair of bright things down in a hole. They appeared like fireflies. I took a long thorn, and intending to pull out the fireflies, I pushed the thorn inside and then withdrew it. When I looked at the point of the thorn, it was wet. And at the same time, there arose a faint cry of distress from the hole of the ant-hill. I was taken aback at this. I did not see what I had pierced with my thorn."

The King heard what his daughter said. He went to the ant-hill quickly, and there he saw the aged ascetic in great pain. He ordered his men to raze the ant-hill down and saw the *rishi* sitting on the ground. He fell prostrate, stiff as a stick, before the *rishi;* and joining his palms in supplicant salutation, prayed to him and said:

'Holy one! My daughter has caused you a grievous injury not knowing what she did; I beg of you to forgive her. I have heard that high-souled ones like you have forsworn anger. Hence, please pardon this sin of my daughter.'

Listening to these words of the King spoken in sorrow and with humility, Chyavana replied:

'I am not in the least angry, great king. Though I have cause, I have not cursed you or your daughter. For no sin of mine, I have been hurt in my eyes. I did not wish that you should suffer in this manner. But who can be happy having done an evil turn to a devotee of the Supreme Mother even if Siva Himself should be on his side?

'What shall I do now, old that I am, having lost my eyes? Who will serve a blind man? How shall I live?'

The king quickly assured the *rishi* and said: 'I have lots of servants and they shall wait on you day and night.'

But the *rishi* wailed: 'Alas! I have become blind; there is none to help me. How can I go through my austerities hereafter? How can your servants minister to my needs?

'If you want that I should forgive you, listen, O king! to my words and do as I bid you. Make your daughter attend on me. She shall serve me while I am doing my daily rites and when I am engaged in my penance. Thus alone can I spend my days happily. And, when I am pleased, you and your people will be free from what afflicts you. Take time; make up your mind and give your daughter to me. I assure you there is nothing wrong in this; for I am a *tapasvin* devoted to a holy life.'

Saryaati heard these words of Chyavana. But he was ill at ease. He felt depressed very much. He spoke naught in reply, that he would give his daughter or not.

He debated with himself. 'How can I part with my daughter of divine beauty to one blind, old and deformed like this *rishi?*

'Who will sacrifice his sweet innocent child for his own selfish benefit, denying to her all the joys of life?

'Therefore, whatever the bodily pain I have to undergo, I shall not give my darling daughter to this *rishi*'.

Thus making up his mind, greatly unhappy, Saryaati returned to his city. Arrived at his palace, he gathered his ministers and took counsel with them as to what should be done. 'Shall I give my daughter to him', he asked, 'or shall we submit to this pain in our bodies? Put your heads together and decide what I should do.'

The ministers said with one voice: 'What shall we tell you, royal master? We ourselves are in a dilemma. But how can we advise you to give your lovely Sukanya to that infirm, old man?'

Sukanya was looking on while her father was debating with his advisers. She understood what was in the mind of the ministers though they spoke differently. Smiling gently, she said:

'Father, why are you so depressed? Why do you look so unhappy on account of what may happen to me? I shall myself go to the *rishi;* I shall appease his anger making a gift of myself to him!'

Looking at his daughter, internally appreciating her noble resolve, the King spoke to her in the midst of his ministers:

'How, my dear, will you, helpless and alone, serve him who is blind, old and prone to quick anger?

'Greedy of welfare, how can I resign you in the flush of your youth to the grey-haired *rishi?*

'A father should give his daughter in marriage to a vigorous and affluent youth, supported by a large circle of kinsmen, never to one who is poor and forsaken.

'Where is your beauty of form and feature, my dearest, and where is this old man of the forest? How can you be given away to one who is by no means equal to you?

'With what heart can I consent to your living in a hermitage in the woods performing the offices of an attendant not befitting your royal status?

'Far better that I and my men should die of their present bodily affliction than that you should be sacrificed to an old blind man.

'What is destined will certainly happen; and so I shall not give way to despair. Remain where you are, my child, never will I part with you to the blind one.

'Let my kingdom be secure, or let it be lost. Let this body of mine live or perish. I shall not give you to him who is blind.'

Sukanya heard what her father said. With a face beaming with joy and a heart full of affection, she replied:

'Do not be anxious on my account, dear father. Do not hesitate; give me away this moment to the *rishi*. I shall joyfully do anything to give health and happiness to all these men. Untroubled by any regret, I shall serve this good and holy person in that lonely forest with great devotion.

'You have misjudged me, father. I am not the slave of my youth or of my senses. Know me to be a *sati* wedded to *dharma* and constant in its practice. *Dharma* alone is my supreme asset; not my beauty.'

The King heard these words of his daughter with amazement. The ministers too were filled with wonder as her youthful lips uttered such mature wisdom. Saryaati went to the presence of the *rishi*. Bowing to him with due humility, he said:

'Great one! Accept this my daughter to serve you in due manner.'

Chyavana received her with delight and went through the rites of marriage. Refusing the dowry with which the king gave away his daughter, the *rishi* accepted the princess alone to do personal service to him.

And, when the *rishi* was pleased by this, that very moment, all the people were relieved of their physical malady and the king too was very happy. Leaving his daughter in the hermitage, the King was about to return to the city, when she said:

'Father, take back with you my robes and my jewels. Give me a raiment of bark or a deer-skin to clothe me instead. I shall dress myself in keeping with a wife of a *rishi* and so serve my lord that your fame may resound on earth and in heaven.

'Do not grieve that you have given away your handsome child to an old blind man. To grieve over a gift that has been made will impair the virtue of that gift.

'Do not be anxious on my account. I shall be faithful and firm in my duty to my husband even as Arundhati was to Vasishtha. I shall walk in the footsteps of Anasuya, noble wife of sage Atri of yore.

'That way, I shall make your name live on earth for ever.'

The king saw his daughter give up her jewellery and her costly attire. He saw her put on the dress of the *rishipatnis* of the forest. Tears blinded his eyes and he stood as one dazed. Every one who witnessed the change that the princess had assumed was deeply moved and wept aloud.

Taking unwilling leave of her, and entrusting her to the care of the *rishi*, the king returned to his city with his ministers and attendants.

After the king left, the sweet little maiden directed herself to the service of her husband, tending his sacrificial fires. Plucking sweet fruits and edible roots, she would offer them to her lord with dutiful affection.

Bathing him in agreeably warm water, she would wrap his body with a deer-skin and set him on his holy seat. Filling his *kamandalu* with water and placing *kusa* grass by his side, she would provide him with whatever was needed for his daily offerings. When he had finished his rites, she would gently lift him with her tiny hands and set him down for his meal for the day. She would serve him with tender fruits and the food of *neevara* grains cooked soft and sweet to suit his tongue.

After he finished his meal, she would respectfully give him water to sip and bring him the *taambula* to finish off his repast. Then she would gently slide her lord to a recline in a comfortable posture and tend his limbs in the manner that he would desire.

Hurrying through her brief meal, she would again go to him and ask him, 'What is your command, my lord? Shall I press your aching limbs?'

In the evening, after the *homa* was over, she would bring him fruits, soft and sweet and feed him with them. And after that only would she eat waiting for his command.

Then she would make a soft bed for him and slowly let him down to lie on it. She would lull him to sleep pressing his feet with her loving hands. If the night was warm and sultry, she would take a fan and ply it gently over his person. In winter, she would make a fire out of logs of wood and setting it before him, ask him in a tone of mellow sweetness: 'Is it agreeably warm to you, my lord?'

Closing her eyes for a brief while after he had gone to sleep, she would wake up before dawn ere her husband opened his eyes. Getting the water pot and the mud of his bodily ablutions, she would rouse him from his sleep and lead him to a far away place and withdraw herself to a distance. When he had finished, she would hold him by his hand and lead him back to the hermitage. Cleansing him with mud and water, she would place before him a twig for cleaning his teeth.

She would then carry to him water for his bath and ask him with due respect: 'Holy sire! What is your command? Have you washed your face? Here is warm water for your bath with due ceremony uttering the prescribed *mantras*. This is the winter season. The day has just broken. Be pleased to perform your sacrificial rites and worship of the household gods!'

Thus did she serve her husband ministering to his every need as a dutiful and loving wife. She never thought of her own personal comfort, never remembered her erstwhile royal status. Her husband's welfare was her only thought and his service was her greatest delight.

And thus did time pass on.

It happened one day that the sons of the Sun God, the Aswini devatas came to the vicinity of Chyavana's hermitage to spend a pleasant hour. There they saw that damsel of bewitching features returning to her abode in the forest after her bath in the lake. They approached the lovely maiden, and, devouring her beauty with their lustful eyes, they accosted her and said:

'Tarry for a moment, fair damsel! Answer our query. We are the sons of God Surya. Tell us truly, who is your father? Who is your husband? How did you come to these woods? Why are you here all alone returning from your morning bath?

'Your lotus eyes proclaim you like unto Goddess Lakshmi Herself. Sweet one! Soft and tender are your feet. As they glide on the ground, they send a thrill into our hearts.

'You deserve a palanquin for your gentle limbs. Why do you go on foot? Why do you move about in these parts unprotected by anybody?

'You must be attended by a host of maidens to serve you. Why are you alone? Surely you must be a princess of the earth or a goddess of the sky. Tell us truly; what are you?

'Lucky is the mother who has given birth to you; blessed is your father. And the fortune of him who has you for wife, ah, that is beyond words.

'The very ground that you tread on is heaven itself and your every step sanctifies the spot that it rests on.

'How fortunate are these birds and beasts of the forests who daily feast their eye on your beauty! How sacred are these regions in which you live!

'But enough of our praise. Now tell us in truth, who is your father, who is your husband? We are eager to see them both.'

Trembling all over and creeping into herself with bashful modesty, Sukanya replied:

'I am the daughter of king Saryaati and wife of the *rishi* Chyavana who resides close by, to whom my father gave me away, as it so happened. My husband is blind; he is old; but he is a great *tapasvin*. I serve him day and night willingly and with joy.

'Who are you, pray? Why are you here? My lord waits in the *ashrama*. Please come there and sanctify our abode.'

Hearing that, the twin gods again queried: 'How were you given away by your father to this *rishi* in the forest? In the sylvan spaces, you shine with the lustre of lightning itself. There is none like you even among the *devas* in heaven. Your features deserve to be clad in divine raiment, not in this rustic deer-skin with which you have clothed yourself.

'What an irony of fate that you should thus languish in these woods; that a wide-eyed beauty like you should be set to serve one who is blind of both eyes; that your youth is wasted on an old man of many winters!

'You are in the bloom of youth. How can the sensual darts issuing forth from your bewitching eyes hit the mark in your husband's withered heart?

'Verily, Brahma who destined your lovely person to be married to this blind man has lost his reason. This is not right, and so, set your heart on another more fitting to your affections.

'Do not turn the fertile years of your youth into a dreary sterility living in these wilds with a husband who does not deserve you in the least.

'Therefore, choose one of us for your husband and sport with us in the pleasure spots of the three regions and give up this despicable life with this blind man. Frail and soft as are your hands, they were not made to carry the water pot or to be heavily laden with these fruits.'

Sukanya heard these words with deep agitation. Mustering courage, she briefly replied:

'You are, both of you, sons of God. You know everything. It ill becomes you to speak like this to me. This is not the language in which one addresses a *pativrata* intent on *dharma.* I have been given in marriage to this great *tapasvin* by my father.

'Would you have a *kulastri* give up her husband and vest her heart on another?

'Go away from here before I pronounce a curse on you.'

The Aswins listened to her speech with wonder. Afraid of the consequence of this reaching the *rishi's* ears, they said:

'Princess! We are pleased with your high regard for *dharma.* Ask for a boon and we shall grant it for your prosperity.

'We are physicians of the gods. We shall be glad to convert your husband into a youth of handsome mien. All three of us will stand before you identical in form and feature. Clever as you are, choose your husband among us.'

Sukanya was amazed with their words. She swiftly hied to the *rishi* and conveyed to him what they spoke.

'My lord! The heavenly twins, the Aswini devatas, sons of the Sun God saw me in these woods. Beholding my handsome features, they spoke to me improper words. Upon my protesting, they said: 'We shall restore your husband's sight and convert him into a youth as comely as ourselves. Choose then one of us three your husband.

'Upon this, I hastened to your presence to know your commands in this plight. It is difficult to pierce the *maayaa* of these gods; I cannot see through their deceit. I shall do as you bid me; for you know everything.'

Chyavana said: 'Take me to where the divine healers are in the forest. Do as they say; do not inquire further.'

Leading her husband near the Aswins, she told them to restore the youth and sight of her husband.

'Let your husband get into the water and immerse himself.'

And he did so.

The Aswins too plunged into the water the same moment.

Then, they all rose from the lake identical in their features, of resplendent body, as handsome youths, golden rings dangling from their ears and shining with divine ornaments.

And they all spoke together: 'Auspicious lady, choose one of us for your husband, him to whom your heart flows forth in love and affection.'

Sukanya saw them. They were exactly like one another. She could hardly spot her husband among them. She was bewildered and she wailed:

'This is a trick which the gods have played on me. How shall I discover my lord among these three? If, perchance, I lay my finger on him who is not my husband, woe unto me. Death will be better than such a grievous mistake. What shall I do?'

She felt that her only go was to seek divine aid, and so she prayed for help to the Supreme Devi:

"You are my sole refuge, my Mother, in this dire predicament. Pray guard my chastity, I fall down at your feet.

"Thou art omniscient and knowest how constant I am to the vows of a *sati*. Pray, help me to find out who among these three is my lord."

The Divine Mother was pleased with her prayer. She gave Sukanya the power to identify her husband which she did without difficulty. The Aswin devatas extolled her for her chastity which no temptation or distress could shake or deflect, and they went back to their heavenly abode taking leave of the *maharshi*.

His sight regained and himself rejuvenated as a handsome youth, Chyavana led a life of holy felicity with his charming and dutiful wife who wrought a miracle by the power of her love and loyalty to her wedded husband.

And so, Sukanya's name stands inscribed in the scroll of the great *satis* of immortal glory.

[From *Devi Bhagavata*]

9. WISE COUNSEL

There was once a Brahmana named Kausika. He had mastered all the Vedas. He was a great *tapasvin.*

One day, he was chanting the Vedas standing under a tree. A crane that was sitting on a branch of that tree happened to drop its leavings on his head at that time. Kausika got angry and looked up at it with flaming eyes. That instant, consumed by the fire of his anger, the crane fell down dead at his feet. The Brahmana was moved with pity for the bird and repented that he gave way to his passion in a manner that brought about the death of a poor bird.

Then Kausika went to a village nearby seeking alms. He stood before a familiar house and, as usual, asked for his *bhiksha.* The lady of the house told him to stay for a while till she finished cleaning the vessels.

Just at this time, her husband returned home. Upon that, the lady turned to attend on him, while the Brahmana waited for his *bhiksha.* She ministered to her husband's needs, offered him water to wash his feet and for his ablutions. She served him with the food that she had prepared and was talking to him and regaling him with her pleasant speech. She was a dutiful wife.

While she was thus engaged serving her husband, she saw the Brahmana still waiting outside. She censured herself for having made him wait, and came out with the *bhiksha* for him.

"What is this, lady? Having asked me to wait, you did not attend to me nor did you tell me to go?" complained Kausika.

The good lady saw that the Brahmana was angry. He was all afire with indignation. But she replied to him in gentle speech:

"Forgive me, holy Brahmana. My husband who is my god came home very hungry and tired. And so, I hastened to attend on him and serve him food."

"So, your husband is more important than a waiting Brahmana—is he?" retorted Kausika. "How well you perform the duties of *grahasthaasrama*—slighting a Brahmana! Don't you know that even Indra makes obeisance to Brahmanas? How much more should mortals like you do so! Either you are unschooled in your duties as a *grihini* or you have not learnt it from your elders. Remember, *brahmanas* are like fire itself; they would burn everything, even the whole world!"

The lady replied: "Holy Sir, I am not a crane. Tapasvin that you are, give up your anger. What can you do to me looking at me with your angry eyes? I am never disrespectful to Brahmanas whom I esteem like gods. Sinless one, pray forgive me if I have offended you.

"Yes, I have been intent on serving my husband. Of all gods, to me my husband is the highest. It is my duty to serve him most meticulously. See holy Sir, the effect of such service. Though I was not at the spot, I was able to know that your anger brought about the death of that crane.

"Best of Brahmanas! Know that anger is the greatest enemy that resides in the body. Him alone do the *devas* speak of as a Brahmana who has given up anger and lust.

"Him alone do the *devas* speak of as a Brahmana who knows the Moral Law and looks upon all men as he looks on himself.

and eat at night. A man can be good even while pursuing a profession which, though inherently bad, is his by his birth.

"While engaged in the tasks of his *kuladharma*, a man should not omit to practise the general *dharmas*. Listen, my good sir, as I unfold them to you.

"Constant in *dharma*, a man should be indifferent to praise and censure. He should not indulge in false speech; he should do good without being requested. He should not fail in his duties out of lust, anger or enmity. He should not return evil for evil; he should be kind and gentle at all times and to everybody.

"No man can conceal his sins. The gods in the sky see his transgressions. So does the Supreme Being residing in his heart."

Kausika listened to the Vyaadha with great earnestness and humility. He wished to know more; and so, he wished to be enlightened further on the marks of virtuous conduct.

Said the Vyaadha: "Sacrifice, Gifts, Penance, Study of the Vedas and Truth—these five are the marks of a good life. They alone are considered to lead a disciplined life who have conquered lust and anger, who are free from pride, avarice and faithlessness. Service of the elders, Satya, gentleness and the sense for giving away—these make a man virtuous.

"The secret of all Knowledge lies in Satya; the essence of Satya is self-control; the fruit of self-control is renunciation.

"Keep away from the *naastikas* (unbelievers) who transgress every rule, who lead a cruel life given to sin. Always seek the company of the virtuous. Lust and temptation are sharks in the river of life. The senses and their objects are its waters. If you wish to cross it and reach the other shore beyond re-birth, get into the boat of wisdom and courage.

"*Ahimsa* is the supreme virtue. Satya is its basis. One who is wedded to *ahimsa* is good to every creature. Purity of conduct is the mark of good men. It is the fragrance of their inner nobility.

"The Vedas prescribe the *dharma* which one should practise. The *Dharmasastras* amplify it. The conduct of the good provides examples of Dharma."

The Vyaadha continued:

"You may wonder, holy Brahmana, why, in spite of all this Knowledge, I pursue this cruel trade. That is my destiny which I cannot avoid. It is the evil life that I led in a former life that has led me into my present profession. I cannot get away from my *svadharma*. And I am striving to liquidate that past karma. I am trying to atone for it by gifts, by Truth, by service of elders and of the twice-born.

"You speak of *himsa* and condemn it, but holy one, tell me truly, can one refrain from it absolutely? Is there not *himsa* in ploughing the earth for agriculture? How many insects living in the soil are turned over by the plough! Is there not life in the seeds of grain and in the blades of grass? Do we not injure them in the course of our lives? We cut trees to make logs of them. Is it not injury to them? Plants and their fruits are instinct with life. And there are living organisms in the water that we bathe in and which we drink. Life pervades everything in this world.

"And, life lives on life. Fish devour fish. Animals prey upon each other for food. Why, even when we walk, we tread on countless unseen living creatures. Sitting, lying down, knowingly or unknowingly we injure other lives. Earth, air and water, everything is full of life. And so, how can man ever go about without possibly injuring some living creatures? Reflecting on this, it would appear that there is none who can practise *ahimsa* to perfection, who can avoid *himsa* in one form or other.

"While it will be difficult to lead a life of complete *ahimsa,* yet it can be affirmed truly that he who pursues his *svadharma* is indeed a noble person even though it involves injury to others.

"The elders declare that Vedas are the source of all *dharmas.* Their nature is very subtle, infinite and various. Men reap the fruits of their actions, good or bad as they may be. In times of distress, the afflicted man lays the blame on the gods. Fool that he is, he does not realise that all that he suffers has been brought on himself by his own evil deeds."

The Brahmana asked: "Pray tell me why and how does a man take to evil ways."

The Vyaadha replied: "Impelled by curiosity, a man's mind begins to function. The knowledge which springs from it produces desire. Thwarted desire leads to anger. Driven by desire, he exerts to attain its object and goes in quest of sensuous delights. From that spring attachment and aversion; greed and delusion follow in their wake. A deluded man cannot understand *dharma.* That lack of understanding lands him in sin. Though warned by friends and learned men, he puts them away by specious answer. Such a man leads an *adharmic* life, thinking evil, speaking and doing it all his life. All his virtues disappear in this climate of evil. He seeks the company of other evil men who lead sinful lives and ultimately he comes to grief.

"And now let me tell you about the virtuous man. He sees these dire consequences in advance by his wisdom. He discriminates between good and evil and seeks the company of the good. By such association he develops a taste for *dharma*. His heart becomes pure and he enjoys supreme peace by the enlightenment of his inward spirit. He is ever happy like a person who sleeps soundly. His mind is steady like a flame trimmed by a skilful hand.

"Finally, O best of Brahmanas, let me put it all in a nutshell. By every means one should control anger and avarice. This is the greatest penance that a man can do. One should guard one's *tapas* from anger and from pride. One must guard one's learning from vanity and one's own self from delusion. Integrity is the highest virtue; forgiveness is the greatest strength. Knowledge of the self is the most supreme knowledge and Truth is the best discipline.

"Speaking truth makes for real glory; to know the Truth is the most worthwhile Knowledge. That which is the source of good to all beings, is real Truth.

"He alone is a true *tyaagi* who performs the duties of his station in life without any desire, who makes an oblation of all his actions in the fire of renunciation. *Viyoga*, detachment from the world is the way to *Yoga*, attachment to God.

"One should not harm any creature; one should look at every being with a friendly eye. Humility, equanimity, desirelessness and contentment, these alone lead to true wisdom. In this world and in the next, one should be free from the sense for possession, one should remain free from all sorrow and steadfast in mind. Observing the vows of silence and forbearance, intent on spiritual discipline, enjoying solitude in society, one should strive for liberation. He who has renounced both joy and sorrow, attains the Supreme."

The Brahmana stood amazed at the words of the Vyaadha. "Verily, you have spoken the most profound truths. There does not seem to be anything about Dharma that you do not know."

The Vyaadha said: "Stand up, holy Brahmana and come with me. I shall show to you the *dharmas* that I practise. You must see my mother and my father." He took the Brahmana in and there the Brahmana beheld the aged parents before whom the Vyaadha prostrated with great reverence.

The old parents said: "Arise, arise, thou well-versed in *dharma*. May the *dharmas* that you observe protect you always. May you live long! We are pleased with your service. And serving us, you have thereby rendered due worship to your grandsire and your great grandsire as well."

The son presented the Brahmana Kausika to his parents and they welcomed him with all marks of hospitality. He, in his turn, made eager enquiries of their welfare and of the members of their household.

The Vyaadha turned to the Brahmana and said:

"My parents are the gods whom I worship. I live for their sake and my wife, my sons and my servants all are devoted to their welfare. I bathe them myself and I feed them with my hands. I speak to them kindly. I never utter anything unpleasant to them. One who seeks prosperity should worship his father, his mother, the sacred fire and his preceptor. This is the duty of every householder.

"And now, listen carefully to what I am going to tell you. You have come away abandoning your parents. Even though you came to learn the Vedas, yet you did wrong in leaving your parents to themselves. They have turned blind, grieving over you. Go back to them to comfort them. All your knowledge of the Vedas will be as chaff if you do not do your duty by your parents. There is no higher *dharma* than serving one's parents."

The Brahmana said: "It was a divine hand that brought me to you. Rare indeed is a person who can teach the Dharma like you. You have rescued me from falling into hell. I shall go back to my parents to serve them as you have enjoined me.

"Yet, one doubt assails my mind. You are a great *dharmajna;* You are well-versed in every *dharma* and you practise them most carefully. Though you are a low-born, I do not consider you low. Evidently, it is some karma that has made you take this birth in a low caste. What may that be? Tell me, I pray, I am eager to know."

The Vyaadha replied: "In my previous life I was a Brahmana, learned in the Vedas and in the Vedangas. By a sin that I committed, I fell down to this inferior state. The King of the land in which I lived was a great friend of mine. Once I accompanied him as he went out to hunt. Being a skilled archer myself, I discharged an arrow which happened to hit a *rishi*. Pierced by the arrow he fell down on the ground. Thinking that my victim was a deer, I ran to the spot. When I beheld him, I felt extreme anguish and implored him to forgive me for what I had done in ignorance. The *rishi* could not be appeased. He cursed me saying 'You shall be born as a cruel butcher in a low caste family.'

"I begged him with tears in my eyes not to consign me to such a cruel fate. But he said 'My curse cannot be revoked. But I shall confer a favour on you. Though you may take a low birth, you shall be a *dharmajna*. Knowing all dharmas, you will serve your mother and father with filial duty. By the merit of that service, you will remember the incidents of your past life. When you have worked out the effects of this curse, you will be born a Brahmana again.'

"Thus assured, I pulled out the arrow from his breast, gently carried him to his hermitage and softly laid him to bed. He then breathed his last."

Kausika said: "I now understand why though so learned as you are, you pursue this cruel profession. But surely you are sinless; for, you do your *svadharma* which has accrued to you by the evil karma of a past life. But do not grieve over your fate."

"No" replied the Vyaadha. "I do not grieve for what has happened to me. I must suffer what I have invited on myself by my past karma. One cannot escape the effects of karma by merely weeping over them. One must adopt the proper means to annul its effects. Realising the transitoriness of all earthly things and intent on reaching the Supreme Goal of life, one must conduct oneself with wisdom and fortitude. Holy sire, I do not give way to grief; but I am biding my time to be released from the *rishi's* curse."

Pleased with the Vyaadha's words, the Brahmana took leave of him respectfully and went back to his parents whom, thenceforward, he served with earnestness and devotion.

Truly has it been declared that the royal road to salvation is paved with the golden bricks of one's *svadharma*.

[From the *Mahabharata*, Vana Parva]

10. GOOD FOR EVIL

This happened long ago. There was a Brahmana called Gautama. Seeking alms, he came to a prosperous village. In it lived a robber who, however, was considerate to Brahmanas, who always spoke the truth and were lavish in charity. The Brahmana went to the robber's abode and asked for alms. He wanted lodgings to stay in and articles of food which would last him for a year.

The robber gave the Brahmana all that he asked for. He also gave him clothes to wear and provided him with a widow who was young and beautiful to attend on him. The Brahmana received these gifts with joy and lived there itself happily in the company of that woman.

Instructed by the robber, he soon learnt archery and began to kill the birds and animals in the neighbourhood. The company of the evil man soon made him evil too.

While the Brahmana was leading this disreputable life, another Brahmana came to that place. Given to austerities, pure in conduct, he was learned in the Vedas and lived a life of stern discipline. He would not eat at the house of one who was not a Brahmana. And so, he looked out for a Brahmana's house in that place inhabited by robbers.

Searching high and low, he discovered the abode of Gautama and was entering it. Just then, Gautama came into his house carrying a wounded bird on his shoulder, wielding a bow and arrow, and with streams of blood flowing down his body.

The visiting Brahmana beheld this hideous spectacle. Reproaching Gautama, he said: "What is this that you are doing? Have you forgotten that you are Brahmana by birth? How did you turn into a robber? Recollect your ancestry and your status. Abandon this instant these evil ways that you have adopted. Run away from this place and become your former self once again."

Gautama pleaded: "I am poor and indigent, holy Brahmana! I am not versed in the Vedas. I came here in quest of livelihood.

"Your words have brought me back to my senses; I am thankful to you. We shall, both of us, go away from here. But tarry for this night. We shall start at daybreak."

The visitor agreed to spend the night there. But he did not touch anything. Though hungry, he did not wish to eat in that place.

When day dawned and after the visitor had left, Gautama moved out of that place to go elsewhere.

On the way, he saw a caravan of traders and he joined them as they were wending their way to the sea. They had not gone far when a mad elephant rushed against them and many in the caravan were killed by the wild animal.

Gautama somehow managed to escape the fury of the elephant. But he was at a loss to know where to go. He roamed in the forest all alone.

In the course of his wanderings, he came upon a sylvan retreat of luxuriant vegetation, fragrant with colourful flowers and laden with delicious fruits. In the midst of that abode of celestial splendour, there was a mighty tree which had sent out its branches all around. Gautama sought its refreshing shade. Lying on the ground there, he was soon lulled to sleep by the cool breeze which was a balm to his aching limbs.

The sun was setting in the western sky when there flew in a divine crane from the regions on high. In his celestial home, he was known as *Naadejangha,* while on earth he was reputed as *Raajadharma.* He was the King of cranes, born of the *rishi* Kaasyapa and was reputed for his great wisdom. In splendour, he was like the gods themselves.

Waking up, Gautama beheld the crane with wonder. Tired as he was, and hungry, he looked at him with eager eyes with intent to make a meal of him.

"Welcome to you, Brahmana," said the bird Raajadharma. "Providential is your visit to my home. The sun has set and it is now dark. Accept my hospitality for the night. And you may go in the morning where you wish to go."

Gautama was amazed to listen to the voice of that bird which addressed him. The bird continued:

"I am Kaasyapa's son; Dakshaayani is my mother. You are my guest tonight. Welcome to you."

So saying, the bird ministered to the Brahmana's needs in the prescribed manner. He made him sit on a log of wood and placed before him for his food fish from the sacred Bhaagirathi flowing at a distance. Gautama ate them all and was satisfied. The bird flapped its wings over his body fanning his tired limbs. When Gautama felt refreshed, the bird queried about his name and lineage.

He replied: "I am Gautama" and spoke nought else.

Making for him a bed of soft leaves and fragrant flowers, Raajadharma then asked the Brahmana to tell him the purpose of his visit to his abode.

"Wise one! I am a poor Brahmana; I came to the sea in quest of wealth."

"Don't worry, my dear guest. Your wish shall be fulfilled. You shall go from here achieving your purpose. Brihaspati speaks of four ways to obtain wealth. Inheritance, good fortune, one's own labour and the kindness of friends are four sources of riches. You have now become my friend. So, I shall dower you with the wealth that you wish to have. Sleep in peace."

At daybreak, after making kind enquiries if he had spent a restful night, Raajadharma told the Brahmana: "Go, friend, along this road. You will find the place of my pal, the King of the Raakshasas. His name is Viroopaaksha. Tell him I sent you to him and convey to him what you want. Your wish will be fulfilled."

Upon this, taking leave of the bird, and with a light heart, eating fruits of surpassing sweetness on the way, Gautama turned his steps towards the palace of the Raakshasa-king. He soon reached the gates of the palace and was warmly received by the King's men and led to the royal presence.

Receiving him with royal dignity Viroopaaksha offered him a seat of honour and enquired about his name, family, learning and his mode of life. Gautama gave out only his name and family and did not reply to the other questions. Understanding from his silence that he did not have anything of Brahmanical virtues and was a stranger to the sacred lore the King asked him:

"Where do you live, good man; to what family does your life belong? Speak truly: don't be afraid."

Gautama replied:

"I come from the central regions. I live amidst hunters. I am married to a Sudra widow."

The King stood perplexed. "This man is a Brahmana by birth" thought he; "and he has been sent to me by my dear friend, Kaasyapa's son. I must fulfil the purpose for which he has sent this Brahmana over here.

"On this day in the month of Kaartika, I feed a thousand Brahmanas. Let this Brahmana be one of them. I shall load him with gifts.

"This is a sacred day; here is an *atithi* who has come of his own accord; I have determined to give away wealth to the guests. What is there for me to enquire further?"

Then there gathered in the palace a thousand Brahmanas after their holy bath clad in silks of rare texture. Viroopaaksha received them with due ceremony and made them sit on seats of *Kusa* grass. He worshipped them offering them *tila, darbha* and water invoking the gods and *pitrs* in their persons. Then bright and polished plates of gold engraved with intricate designs and filled with food made in ghee and honey were humbly offered to them. He also gave them large quantities of precious stones as *dakshina*. He told them: "Take these precious stones, as much as you please and also the golden plates on which the food has been offered to you." The Brahmanas did not require to be told again and they took all that they wanted.

The King again said: "Ye Brahmanas, you have come here from several places. You may return home without fear of molestation on the way. My *raakshasas* will desist from doing any one harm on this sacred day. Go in safety and in peace."

Then the Brahmanas sped back to their respective homes and among them, Gautama too went back carrying on his head the presents with which the Raakshasa-king had loaded him.

The burden of the gifts was too heavy for him and soon getting tired, he laid himself down on the way under a banyan tree. The long march had also made him hungry.

Just then, Raajadharma flew in there and accosted his friend, the Brahmana. He fanned him with his wings out of his weariness and brought him food to eat and appeased his hunger. He made a fire to give him warmth in that cold night and then he himself went to sleep on the ground nearby.

Having eaten, the Brahmana felt refreshed. And then, he said to himself: "Heavy is this load of gifts that I have brought from the Raakshasa's palace. In my greed, I gathered more than I can carry. I have yet to go a long way. What shall I do for my food before I reach home? I cannot get anything to eat in these dreary places."

And then, with devilish delight, he exclaimed: "Ah! here is the royal bird, a literal mass of flesh. I shall kill him and carry his body to provide my meal when I get hungry on the road."

He took up his bow and sent his arrow straight at the noble bird which was sound asleep innocent of the Brahmana's evil intention. He killed the bird at one stroke, plucked out its feathers, threw away its bones and cooked its flesh in the fire and sped away with it.

After some days, Viroopaaksha told his son : "It is long since Raajadharma came to see us. Early in the morning, he leaves his tree to make his obeisance to Brahma and on his return flight, he would invariably visit us. These two days he has not come here. I have a suspicion that that degenerate Brahmana has done him some harm. He appeared as one devoid of mercy; he had a cruel mien; his looks were evil. My son, go quickly and make sure that no harm has befallen my friend. Find out if that noble bird is alive or dead."

The Prince went forth on his errand and soon came to the banyan tree where he saw that his skeleton was all that was left of that dear bird. Weeping aloud in uncontrollable grief, he ran in hot pursuit of the wicked Brahmana and saw him carrying Raajadharma's flesh minus the wings and bones.

He returned to the palace leading Gautama to Viroopaaksha's presence and placed before the King the flesh which he had cooked for his meal.

The King and his ministers set up a big wail, grieving over the death of the celestial bird. All the ladies of the royal household and all the subjects of the King joined in the general lamentation.

"Let this fell Brahmana be killed this instant and let the *raakshasas* feast on his flesh," said the King.

But the *raakshasas* were not willing to eat the flesh of that sinner. "Throw him in the midst of robbers," said they, "we shall not touch the flesh of this ungrateful wretch."

The King assented. The *raakshasas* pierced him with their weapons, cut him to pieces and cast them to the robbers.

But, the robbers too did not wish to eat his flesh. Cannibals though they were, they would not eat a man who has no sense of gratitude, who is given to drink, who is a thief and is guilty of lapse from the *dharmas* of his birth. They would not touch the flesh of such vile persons. For, expiations have been provided for every sin, but not for ingratitude. One who is treacherous to a friend, cruel and ungrateful, that despicable man is no food for the cannibals. Even the worms will not feed on him.

Viroopaaksha gathered the bones of Raajadharma and arranged for a fitting funeral for his noble friend. Just then, there passed overhead Surabhi, the divine Cow. Milky froth flowed from her mouth and rained on the funeral pyre. Restored to life by that life-giving ambrosia, Raajadharma immediately came out of the fire and stood before the King and his attendants.

At that time, Devendra came there and narrated how Raajadharma had to die by a curse of Brahma and was restored to life by the decree of Brahma himself with the help of the divine Cow.

Upon this, Raajadharma fell down at Indra's feet and said: "If the gods have been gracious to bring me back to life, I beg that my friend Gautama too may be likewise blessed by them and restored to life."

Indra agreed and when he sprinkled *amrita* on Gautama's mangled body, the Brahmana stood up as before.

Raajadharma embraced him fondly and let him go with all the gifts that he had received from the King.

[From the *Mahabharata,* Santi Parva]

11. DESIRE INCREASES BY FULFILMENT

There was a King known as Maandhaata. He had married Indumati, the daughter of Sasibindu. By her he had many sons and daughters.

At that time there lived in the aquatic regions a *rishi* called Saubhari who was a great *tapasvin* well-versed in the Vedas. One day, he saw the King of the fish, Sumanta by name, in the waters. He was a fish of enormous size. He was swimming on the waters and diving into them as it pleased him. All the while, he was surrounded by a large shoal of his children and grandchildren who were sporting all about him. Sumanta appeared very happy in the midst of his progeny.

Saubhari saw this. His mind was filled with envy to see Sumanta so happy. He said to himself: "Why should I not have children and grandchildren myself? How I long for such domestic felicity! Well, I shall marry and beget sons and daughters."

He came out of his aquatic abode. He knew that Maandhaata had a number of daughters. So, he went to him. The King received him with reverence and gave him a seat of honour in his court. Addressing him, the *rishi* said:

"I have been a *tapasvin*, O King! for long. Now I wish to marry. Give me one of your daughters to be my wife. Pray do not refuse my request. You belong to the line of Ikshvakus. They are known for their generous gifts. No suitor to them goes back empty-handed. And I expect that you will be true to the noble trait of your ancestors."

Maandhaata listened to these words of the *rishi* with deep respect mixed with fear. He saw how old and haggard the *rishi* was. He could not consent to marry any of his daughters to him. But he was afraid that the *rishi* would curse him if he refused. He was lost in thought and did not speak.

Saubhari noticed the king's hesitation.

"What are you thinking about, Maandhaata? Have I said anything to make you unhappy? Of course, you don't propose to keep your daughters with you for ever, do you? A daughter has to be given away one day or other. Give one of them to me; and you will be doing your duty by her and I too shall gain my desire."

The King could not reconcile himself to his daughter wedding an aged man like that. Yet, he was afraid of the *rishi's* curse. He thought to find a way out of this predicament. He told the *rishi*:

"Holy one! In our family, we leave the choice of the husband to our daughters. We agree to whomsoever they choose to wed. If any of my daughters agrees to marry you, I shall have no objection."

Saubhari saw through the King's mind. "By trotting out this family tradition," thought he, "he evidently wishes to evade my request. He believes that none of his daughters in the flush of her youth and beauty would consent to be my wife. Well, let me see."

Turning to the King he said: "If it is as you have said, let me be taken to the apartments of your Princesses. Let them see me. If any of them agrees to marry me, then give her to me. I suppose that is a fair offer and you can have no objection."

The King agreed and bade one of his attendants to take the *rishi* to where the Princesses lived. As he was approaching that part of the palace, in the twinkling of an eye Saubhari transformed himself by his *yogic* powers into a youth of superlative beauty far exceeding that any mortal or a divine being could boast of. The attendant went ahead and spoke to the Princesses:

"I bring you the King's command. Here is a *rishi*. The King bids me to tell you, that he wishes to marry one of you. Which of you agree to be his wife? Look at him and tell me truly which of you likes him for a husband."

The Princesses heard the King's message. They all looked at the *rishi*. They devoured him with eager eyes. They were enchanted, one and all of them. They all fell in love with him the moment they saw him. They vied with each other to have him.

One of them, more imperious than the rest, exclaimed: "Enough, my sisters, I have chosen to marry him. You had better retire."

Another said: "No. You do not deserve him. See how well my beauty matches with his handsome person!"

A third: "Cease your pother; don't you see that God had made him for me?"

Another Princess intervened and said: "I have determined to wed him. Let me see who comes in my way."

Still another: "I have chosen him and he shall be mine. That settles it."

Thus each Princess said "He is mine," "He is mine."

The attendant saw all this clamour for the *rishi*. He went back to the King and reported that every one of the Princesses wished to marry him. Maandhaata heard it with amazement. Meanwhile, the *rishi* too returned to the royal presence. To the King's eyes he appeared the old decrepit man that he was. To the Princesses he showed himself in exquisite beauty of form and feature, handsome all over from head to foot.

When every one of his daughters consented to marry the *rishi*, Maandhaata agreed to his taking all of them. He celebrated the marriage with due pomp and splendour.

After the wedding was over, Saubhari took all his wives to his hermitage. Arrived there, by his *yogic* powers, he caused a number of mansions to be constructed in an idyllic setting with gardens and lawns, with rivulets and fountains, with orchards and flowerbeds. The interior of every mansion was furnished in the most lavish manner. Nothing was lacking which imagination could conjure or fancy could desire. All the best was provided to feed the body and to delight the mind. Each Princess was accommodated in a separate palace and she had a large retinue of servants to attend on her. Thus they all lived there in the midst of luxury that did not grow stale by enjoyment.

One day, the King's thoughts happened to turn to his daughters. He was anxious to know if they fared well in the *rishi's* rustic home in its rugged surroundings. So he went there to have a look at them and learn at first hand about the way they lived with their husband.

He first went to his eldest daughter. He was struck with wonder when he beheld her mansion and everything about it. He enquired of her with parental eagerness: "Child, are you happy here? Do you feel unhappy about anything? Does the *rishi* treat you properly? Do you ever think of your home?"

"Father dear, don't be anxious about me. I cannot tell you how exceedingly happy I am. Yet, who will not think of home, sweet home for ever?

"Still, father, I am worried over one fact. My husband spends all his time with me. He does not go to any of my other sisters. I feel guilty that he lavishes his love on me alone neglecting my sisters. They too have married him, but he does not turn to them at all. When I think of the lot of my sisters, I feel very unhappy."

Maandhaata then went to the palace of his second daughter and made similar enquiries.

"Father," said she, "I am delighted with my lord. Oh, how he loves me! He is with me always. I seem to have monopolised him, whole and entire. But should not my sisters too have him to receive his love and affection? But he does not go to them at all. When I think of that, I weep in secret."

Every one of his daughters told the same tale. The King was filled with wonder. He marvelled at the Yogic powers of the *rishi*. He spoke to the *rishi* and said:

"Holy Sir, I misjudged you. I now realise the glory of your *tapas*."

He stayed with the *rishi* for a few days and then returned to his capital.

As days passed, Saubhari begot a number of sons by his wives. Looking at them, he said to himself: "Ah! They are my children! How endearing is their sweet babble and their artless laughter! See, how they crawl! Very soon they will begin to toddle and learn to walk. When they grow up to be handsome youths, they will be married and they will make me a grandfather!"

Thus was he lost in his dreams. He spent a number of days in delightful imagination of the happy time he would spend with his sons, his grandsons and their children. His thoughts turned to the fish King Sumanta. He felt gratified that he too enjoyed the domestic felicity which he once envied in him.

Suddenly, one day, he woke up to the reality. "Woe is me!" cried he, "what a fool have I been to waste all my *tapas*! I have become a victim to my desires and I have fallen from my high estate. First I wished to marry. That was how attachment gained entry into me. One attachment bred another. I then desired to have sons, and grandsons. My desire went beyond that too. Desires surge in the heart in unending succession like waves on the bosom of the sea. As one desire is fulfilled, it awakens another. In the grip of my desires, I have lost hold on God. A man who is the slave of his desires does not rest his mind on the Supreme.

"I was a fool to look at the King of the fish and to yearn for a life like the one he lived. I allowed myself to be tempted. I have fallen from my spiritual heights.

"Attachment destroys *tapas*. Even he who has reached the pinnacle of *yoga* falls down when once attachment obtains a lodgement in his breast. What then of those like me who are of inferior mettle?

"Now I have learnt the bitter lesson. I shall strive to free my soul from the bonds that bind it to the earth and prevent it from soaring in the regions of the Spirit. From this moment onward, I shall spend my days in penance and prayer; I shall meditate without intermission on the Lord of lords, the God of resplendent Beauty and supreme Power, He who is everywhere and in all things, Who abides in the heart of every object small and great. Conquering my passions, killing my desires, freeing myself from every attachment, I shall recover my Soul and attain immortality. I shall surrender myself to Him, Who is the Lord of all, Who is without beginning and without end, without Whose consent not a blade of grass can move in this world."

Making this stern resolve, Saubhari gave up his wives, sons and all these earthly possessions, and turned into an ascetic once again.

Burning out all his desires in the fire of his penance, he reached that bourne from which there is no return.

[From the *Vishnu Purana*]

12. HE DID NOT ASK—BUT GOD GAVE

Sudaama was a learned Brahmana. He was well-versed in the spiritual lore. He had acquired all his knowledge from the Sage Saandeepani. Krishna was a co-pupil of Sudaama under Saandeepani. Both of them were fast friends.

After finishing their education, Krishna and Sudaama parted from each other. Krishna became King of Dwaraka and Sudaama returned to his hamlet, married and led the life of a *grihastha*.

Sudaama who was known as Kuchela from his ragged raiment, was poor—extremely poor. Detaching his mind from the pleasures of the world, he led a life of complete renunciation. Practising stern control of his senses, and because of that, he enjoyed perfect peace of mind. He eked out his livelihood and strove to support his family by whatever chance would bring him.

Sudaama's wife was an ideal partner. Kshutkshaama—probably so called because her frame was wasting away by hunger — was devoted to her husband whom she adored as her god. She consented to the life of indigence that she shared with him and never uttered a word of complaint.

Kshutkshaama had children—a good number of them. Though as the dutiful wife of her lord, she accepted his poverty without a demur, the mother in her was anguished to see her children starve and go without food frequently for many days.

It went on like this for a number of years. But how long could Kshutkshaama suppress the grief in her bosom? She felt that this could not, must not, go on for ever, that something must be done if only for the sake of the children.

And so, one day, she reverently approached her husband and said with great hesitation:

"Bhagavan! May I recall to you the days you spent in Sage Saandeepani's hermitage. At that time Krishna underwent the discipline of the *brahmacharyasrama* with you. He is your friend. He is the Lord of Lakshmi Herself. He is the refuge of those in distress. All good men in the world seek His protection.

"Go to Him, my lord! He will surely help us. He will provide us with the means to support our family. He is the friend of the poor, the hope of the hopeless, the protector of the forlorn, the *deena bandhu,* the *anaatha rakshaka.* He would give away even Himself to those who meditate on His holy feet. He is dear to His devotees. Go to Him, my lord, for the sake of the children. He is *Sriyahpati;* the Lord of the Goddess of riches, a small bounty for us will be but a trifle for Him. He will not deny it. Pray, go and ask for the sake of our children.

Kshutkshaama said this and was silent. Kuchela was happy that his wife reminded him that he had an ancient friend in Krishna. But he did not look at it in the way that she did. He thought of Krishna not as a storehouse of wealth. He was a *virakta*; he had cultivated a detached mind. He could not bring himself to ask worldly things from his Krishna. In fact, he would not ask for anything at all. His devotion to Krishna was pure devotion, unmotivated by anything.

But, he received with great delight his wife's suggestion that he should go to Dwaraka. He said to himself: "If I go to Dwaraka, I shall obtain *darshan* of that peerless One; that will be my supreme benefit. I shall be able to feast my eyes beholding His holy person."

Turning to his wife, Kuchela said: "Have you anything at home which I can take to Krishna? If so, give it to me."

Quickly, but quietly, Kshutkshaama went to her neighbours, begged from them a few handfuls of *prithuka* (beaten rice). Bringing it home, she bundled it in a ragged cloth folding it many times over and gave it to her husband.

Receiving it, Kuchela wended his way to Dwaraka, all the while thinking of Krishna and saying to himself:

"Shall I have *darshan* of Krishna? Will I be permitted to enter His palace? Will I be ushered into His presence?"

Arrived at length at the palace gates, to his surprise, he was allowed to pass without question through all the gates until he found himself in the apartments of Krishna's queens. He entered into one of them looking out with eager eyes for Him whom he longed to see.

Krishna was sitting on a couch along with His beloved Rukmini. He saw Sudaama coming at a distance. He jumped to His feet, and ran forward to receive His friend, as Rukmini and the rest watched Him with bewilderment. Halting before Sudaama, Krishna clasped him by his arms and embraced him with loving tenderness, tears of joy sparkling the while in His divine eyes. He led him to His couch and seated him where He was sitting. He bade Rukmini bring water in a pot and washed with His own hands the weary feet of His friend. Collecting the water, He devoutly sprinkled it on His own head and did likewise over Rukmini's head.

Krishna then offered to Kuchela every mark of hospitality and worship with sandal and saffron, decked him with flowers, waved incense and lights before him. Setting before him the most delicious of foods, he spoke to him words of welcome overflowing with endearment.

Rukmini too, taking her cue from her Lord, plied the soothing fan over the tired body of her holy guest, clad in rags, dusty and decrepit as it was.

The ladies of the palace looked on with wonder at the way in which Krishna and Rukmini entertained him and they said to each other:

"Look at the good fortune of this old man, friend. Look at the way our Lord embraces him as if he were His own brother! What merit has this man acquired that our Rukmini who is Lakshmi incarnate, should Herself perform the offices of worship to this stranger to fortune!"

After His friend had rested and was refreshed, Krishna sat by his side and began talking to him recalling the incidents of their *gurukula* life:

"Do you remember friend," asked He, "the days we spent in our guru's hermitage? How happily did we live with him serving him with devotion and fervour, obeying his every command! How well he taught us all the sciences and the arts and how quickly we mastered them all by his blessing which always preceded his instruction! Oh! how he vouchsafed to us the highest wisdom which took us beyond the darkness of ignorance!

"There are three kinds of *gurus*, my friend. The first is the father who gives the body in which one is born in this life. The second is he who instructs in the several *vidyas*. The third helps to attain *atmajnana*, the knowledge of the true Self. Each one of these gurus should be respected and revered. I am not so much pleased by austerities, or tapas, or other forms of worship as by service to the guru.

"Do you remember? One evening, our guru's wife sent us to the woods to collect twigs for the sacrificial fires. We went deep into the forest. Before we could return, we were caught up in a mighty gale and a heavy shower. Soon, the night came on and it was all dark. We caught hold of each other's arm and, groping our way back in the great deluge, we were wandering helplessly all through the night.

"Then, at daybreak, our guru, the sage Saandeepani, distressed that we had not return in time, cried out with deep concern:

'Dear boys, where are you? Why did you go far into the forest unmindful of your safety? How dutifully have you been serving me!' And he came in search of us and brought us back to the hermitage. Pleased with our service to him, he blessed us that our desires may be fulfilled both in this world and in the next. Do you remember all this my friend? What a fright we caused to our guru and his wife!"

Kuchela sat for long dumbfounded as Krishna narrated in His own charming manner the events of their life together long, long ago. At length, he spoke in reply:

"Krishna, You speak of Your learning the Vidyas under a guru, You who are the Guru of the gurus! You are the Jagatguru, the Teacher of the whole world. Yet, You speak of Your *Gurukulavaasa*!—a mere make-believe on your part. All this is Your divine sport! It is all Your *leela*."

Krishna smiled in His own bewitching way. Then changing the subject, he again caught Kuchela by the hand and enquired most eagerly:

"Dear friend, what did you do after you finished your course under Sage Saandeepani? After you tendered to him your *gurudakshina*, did you go through your *samaavarta* with his permission? Did you marry and settle as a householder? Did you get an accordant wife who helps you to observe the duties of your *asrama*?

"Of course, I know you are not after the pleasures of the world. And surely, you do not care for wealth in any form. Material riches have no attraction for you, I am aware that. Like Me, you too go through the conventional stages of life only to preserve the established order; is it not so? Your spirit of detachment will not let you seek the perishing goods of the world."

Before Kuchela could say aught in reply, Krishna added:

"Yes; you must have married and got a good wife. Now what is the delicious thing that you have brought from my sister? Give it to me; do not mind even if it is small or little. Even a tiny thing is big in My eyes when it comes with devotion. Don't you know, it may be just a leaf or a flower or a fruit; I do not look at the object; it is the love behind it which makes it pleasing to Me. And, I accept it all with unbounded joy.

"Now tell Me, friend, what has My sister sent for Me? Do not keep it back."

Kuchela felt ashamed to give his friend, who was the Lord of the entire universe, who was the fountain of all prosperity, the humble *prithuka* which his wife had bundled for Him. He sat still with downcast eyes.

The bundle was tucked under his arm. But Krishna pulled it out from Sudaama's hold. Opening it, he saw the sweet and fragrant *prithuka*. And then, Krishna said to Himself:

"This friend of mine is deeply devoted to Me. He loves Me for My own sake, not to gain any worldly benefit. He has come to Me just to satisfy his wife. I must satisfy his wife's purpose in sending him to Me. I shall shower on him riches beyond the dream of any mortal in this world."

With that, He plunged His palm into the *prithuka* bundle, took a good handful and, putting it into His mouth, ate it with transparent delight. Then, He separated Himself for a second helping when, Rukmini who was standing by, caught hold of His hand and said:

"Enough my Lord! enough. One mouthful is enough to bestow on Your friend all the riches of this world and of the worlds beyond. What more should he have?"

Kuchela was looking on in amazement as his Krishna was eating his humble offering with avidity. After this, he spent the night in Krishna's palace. He felt as if he was in Vaikuntha itself.

Next morning, Krishna bade him good-bye with a fond embrace and he turned his steps homeward gratified with the *darshan* of the Idol of his heart. He returned apparently empty-handed. He had not made a formal request to Krishna for providing him with the means to support his family. Krishna too on His part did not bestow on him any visible gift.

As he was trudging his way home, Sudaama kept thinking of the events of the previous day.

"How gracious and condescending has been Krishna to me!

क्वाहं दरिद्रः पापीयान् क्वःकृष्णः* श्रीनिकेतनः

Oh, what a distance divides me from Him! Where am I? and Where is He! I am the poorest of the poor! He is the home of all riches. I am a sinner; He is the saviour of the sinful.

"Why should He have received me as He did? How did I deserve His adoration of me? How lovingly did He wash my feet with His own hands!"

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* *(Paapam) karshati iti Krishnah.*

As Kuchela walked along thinking on his great good fortune, just a cloud passed through his mind. He asked: "My Krishna is all knowing. Nothing can escape His ken. So, He must have known the purpose of my visit to Him. Why then did He not give me what I had been sent to seek from Him?"

But this cloud quickly passed away.

"Ah," said he, "I have it now. Krishna must have thought: 'If I make Sudaama rich, becoming wealthy, he will not think of Me any more. Evidently, to save me from the sin of forgetting Him, He has sent me back as poor as I was when I went to Him. How great is His mercy!"

Walking back with these thoughts, he came near his home. But he could not see it. It was not there. He looked about here and there to spot it. It had gone. In its place stood a magnificent palace with lovely lawns and colourful gardens all round. Birds of bright plumage were singing gaily. Stalwart men and handsome women in colourful attire were all about the palace doing duty everywhere.

As he stood looking on in mute bewilderment, liveried servants escorted him into the accompaniment of heavenly music.

Kshutkshaama heard that her husband had returned. Getting up quickly, she emerged in his view, radiant in her beauty, in form and feature like unto Mahalakshmi Herself. Seeing her lord, she welcomed him with tears of joy, bowed humbly at his feet, mentally clasping him in her loving embrace.

Kuchela looked at his wife. He saw her shining with the splendour of the celestials and standing in the midst of lovely maidens all decked in gold. He entered into the mansion which was now his home. Hundreds of pillars inlaid with precious stones proclaimed it as equal to Indra's palace in heaven. Here was a couch as white as the foam of the milky ocean. There, on the other side, were chairs of gold sewn in with the softest of cushions. Canopies of pearl of spotless sheen overhang every where.

Beholding all this, Kuchela reflected for a while.

"I am a poor wretch," thought he, "what has brought all this to me? There is only one thing which can explain it. It is Krishna's grace. He does not require to be told; does He? He knows everything, every unspoken thought, every concealed desire. Like the rain cloud, He pours His gifts of His own accord. What did I give Him?—just a tiny knot of a humble *prithuka*!

"May I live to deserve His grace! What need have I of all this wealth and splendour? Oh, my Krishna! Keep my mind away from these enticements. Give me Your friendship in life after life. May it be given to me to serve You with absolute devotion asking for nothing in return. My only wish is that I should pass my days in this life and in the lives to come singing Your praises and dwelling on Your divine qualities. Keep Your memory green in my mind for ever and for ever."

Kuchela and his wife accepted these bounties of the Lord with complete detachment, determined not to be lured away from their constant devotion to the God of their heart.

[From the *Shrimad Bhagavata*]

13. WHEN IN DISTRESS PRAY TO GOD

Defeated in the game of dice, according to the wager that he had agreed to, Dharmaputra had to leave the kingdom along with his brothers and wife and live in the forest for twelve years and stay away *incognito* for another year.

The Pandava brothers were renowned for their regard for *dharma* and their sense of hospitality. So, even when they lived in the forest, a number of good and holy men used to visit them. In keeping with the rules of *grihastha-asrama,* it was Draupadi's duty to feed the guests who came to their abode in the forest every day. In this predicament, she prayed to the Sun-god to help her to feed her guests. Pleased with her prayer, the Sun-god bestowed on her a divine vessel known as *Akshayapaatra* from which would issue as much food as would be needed to feed the guests, her husbands and herself. After she had eaten, which would be after all others had eaten, the vessel would not yield any more food.

Thanks to this miraculous vessel, the Pandavas were able to treat their numerous guests every day to sumptuous dinner and they were happy that they were able to do so. They spent their time in a care-free manner engaging themselves in holy discourse with the anchorites who used to visit them.

The Kaurava Prince Duryodhana heard from his spies that his cousins, the Pandavas, were none the worse for their banishment and that they were living in the forest as comfortably as they used to do in city. Ever intent on doing them harm, in consultation with Sakuni and Dussaasana, who were his evil advisers, Duryodhana was hatching a plot to make them miserable.

Just at that time, there came to his palace Sage Durvaasa, famous for his short temper and for the terrible curses he would pronounce in his fits of anger. Durvaasa came there attended by his numerous disciples. Duryodhana accorded to him a royal welcome with every mark of respect and prayed to him to accept his hospitality. Durvaasa agreed and pleased with his host's attentions, he stayed in the palace for a few days.

Durvaasa was a difficult guest. Suddenly he would say: "I am very hungry: give me food this moment." Then he would go to the river to bathe. Coming back, he would say: "No, I do not wish to eat now, I am not hungry". Another time, he would appear suddenly and demand that he and his disciples should be fed immediately.

Obedient to his every command, Duryodhana served him day and night in a punctilious manner. Durvaasa was mightily pleased with him and said: "Duryodhana, ask of me any boon that you desire. I shall grant it. There is nothing which is just and proper that you cannot obtain from me."

Hearing these words of the *rishi,* Duryodhana breathed in relief. He had already decided, in consultation with his advisers, what boon to ask.

Addressing the *rishi,* he said: "Holy sir, among us Yudhishthira is the eldest. He is a *dharmaatma.* He lives in the forest with his brothers. Of noble character, he is known for his exemplary conduct. Even as you honoured me by being my guest, I request that you will honour him too in the same way. I beg that you will go to him after the

Pandava brothers and their guests have taken their food and Draupadi too has finished her meal and is preparing to rest. If you would confer a boon on me, pray go to them at that time."

Durvaasa assented and took leave of Duryodhana, who was inwardly gloating that he had hatched a successful plot to bring about the undoing of the Pandavas.

Along with Dussaasana and Karna, he was eagerly awaiting the sequel to his nefarious scheme.

Then, one day, learning that the Pandavas had all finished their meal and Draupadi too had had hers, Durvaasa went to their forest home. Dharmaputra saw him coming at a distance. Attended by his brothers, he ran forth to receive him. Making his *pranams* to the *rishi,* he made him sit in a place of honour and requested him to accept his hospitality.

"Bhagwan!" said he, "pray, finish your bath and your ablutions in the river and come back quickly for your dinner which will be waiting for you."

The *rishi* hastened to the river along with his disciples, asking himself "How will he feed me and my disciples after the *Akshayapaatra* has been put by?" Reaching the river he plunged into it.

Meanwhile, Draupadi on learning of the arrival of Durvaasa was perplexed as to how to find food for those unexpected guests particularly as they appeared after the usual hour. She could see no way out of this dire predicament. She knew what would happen if she caused anger to the sage.

In the extremity of her distress, her thoughts fled to Krishna who was her protector in moments of her despair.

She called to him for succour and said: "Oh my Krishna! Thou art the Lord of the universe; Thou art its creator, preserver and destroyer; Thou art the beginning, the middle and the end of everything; Thou art the source and sustenance and the end of everything; Thou art the source and sustenance of all; I resign myself to You. Thou art my refuge. Pray protect me from the *rishi's* anger. Help me out of this grave situation. Didst not Thou save my honour when Dussaasana sought to outrage my modesty? Pray, hasten to help me now as before."

At Dwaraka, Krishna heard this appeal of Draupadi. At once he jumped out of his couch pushing Rukmini aside. In a trice, he appeared before Draupadi in her forest home.

Draupadi was beside herself with joy to see her Lord and Protector. She began to narrate to him her plight in respect of Durvaasa's visit.

Krishna cut her short and said: "Draupadi, I cannot hear all your stories now. Give me some food this moment; I am terribly hungry myself."

The poor lady stood abashed. She had nothing to give Him. "Lord!" she said, "we have all finished our meal. The *Akshayapaatra* has been cleaned and put by. It will give no more food this day. What shall I do?"

Krishna said: "Dear Draupadi, I cannot be put off like this. I am dying of hunger. Go in at once, bring the vessel and let me see it."

Compelled by Krishna, Draupadi went in, brought the vessel and set it before Him. Krishna saw a small bit of a vegetable sticking at the inside of the pot. He scraped it with His fingers; He put it into His mouth and swallowed it saying: "May the Supreme God immanent in all beings be satisfied with this offering; may the Lord of the sacrifice too be pleased."

Then, turning to Sahadeva, He bade him go to the river and bring Durvaasa and his disciples quickly to the hermitage for their meal, and disappeared.

Getting up from their dip in the river, Durvaasa's disciples looked at each other in amazement. Addressing their *guru* they said: "We came to the river, Sir, after bidding Dharmaputra prepare a meal for us. Rising up from the water, we feel we have had a full meal and that we cannot eat anything more. What has been prepared for us will be wasted. Pray, tell us what we should do."

Durvaasa who was in the same state as they, said: "Great indeed will be our offence if we do not turn up for the meal specially made for us. Remembering what happened to me when I offended Ambarisha on a former occasion, I dread the consequence of my trifling with the devotees of God. The Pandavas are good men, constant to *dharma*. They are valiant and brave; learned in all the arts of war and peace. Leading a disciplined life, they are given to austere *tapas*. More than all, they are ardent devotees of God. If angered, they will burn everything before them. Therefore, I dread to meet them now. We shall take to our heels before they come to the river to take us to their place."

And so, all of them—Durvaasa and his disciples—ran away from the river, afraid to face the Pandavas.

Sahadeva could find no trace of them at the bathing ghat and reported the fact to Dharmaputra. The brothers waited for them for long. Finding that they did not appear, they resumed their rest and repose.

Krishna who remained invisible all this while, appeared before them and said: "I understood that you were in danger of being visited with the *rishi's* anger. Draupadi appealed to me for help and I hastened here to protect you.

There is not the slightest cause for you to dread Durvaasa's curse. Afraid to appear before you he fled away from here. Let me assure you; no harm will befall those who are constant to *dharma*. Do not be anxious. And now, give me leave; let me go back."

Hearing these words of the Lord, the Pandavas and Draupadi felt very much relieved in mind and said: "By Your grace, Govinda, we have survived this great danger. Grant our prayer that You will be with us and protect us always."

[*From*: The *Mahabharata*]

14. GENEROSITY

Once there was a king Usinara by name. He was a scion of the Sibi clan. He had acquired great merit by his sacrifices and his austerities. His glory surpassed that of many celestials and holy men. Indra and Agni wished to confer a boon on him. But they put him to a severe test before they did so.

Indra took the form of a hawk and Agni appeared as a pigeon and they both flew over where Usinara was engaged in a sacrifice. The hawk was pursuing the pigeon to catch it and make a meal of it.

To escape the hawk, the pigeon fell on the King's lap and piteously sued for protection and he gently hid it from its pursuer in the folds of his garment.

Seeing this, the hawk got angry. "King! You are reputed to be a *dharmaatma* and yet, you are now trying to do what is forbidden by *dharma*. I am hungry. Do not prevent me from catching my prey. This pigeon is the food ordained for me. Do not violate that ordinance thinking that you are earning merit by giving refuge to this bird."

The King replied: "Mighty bird! This tiny creature is trembling with fear of you. In a bid to save its life, it has sought refuge at my hands. Would you say that it is right to deny protection to the distressed who come to me asking for it? Will it not be a sin to refuse protection? See how the poor bird trembles all over with fear. To abandon one who seeks protection is against the law of *dharma*. To turn away from a *saranaagata* is a sin as heinous as killing a holy man or the cow which is the mother of the world."

The hawk argued: "From food all creatures are born.

They grow by food; they live by it. A man can live long even after giving up everything else in the world; but no one can live without food. Bereft of food, my life will part from this body to roam about in anguish. When I am dead, my wife and children will die. By protecting this pigeon, you will cause death to many creatures.

"If one dharma comes in the way of another, the first is not to be called dharma. That alone is dharma which is in accord with another dharma. Where there is a conflict of dharmas, one should determine which is superior and which is inferior, and act by the higher dharma in preference to the lower."

The King replied: "You talk wisely and well. Are you Suparna himself, the king of the feathered tribe that you seem to know about dharma beyond any doubt? There seems to be nothing that you do not know.

"And yet, how do you consider it right to abandon one who has sought refuge? If you are particular about your food, I shall satisfy your hunger by offering the flesh of some other creature instead. An ox, a boar, a stag, a buffalo — which will you have? Choose and I shall provide you with it—here and now."

The hawk declined any other flesh. "No, Oh King! I shall not eat a boar or an ox or any other creature. Do not put me off by something else. Release from your arms that which has been ordained by the gods to be my food for this day. A pigeon has ever been declared to be the natural food of a hawk. Do not embrace a plantain tree for support in thy ignorance of its fragile roots."

"O hawk! I shall place at your feet this entire kingdom of the Sibis. I shall give you everything that you may want except this hapless bird which has come to me to save its life. Tell me what I must do to compensate for this bird; I shall do it at once and most willingly. But, pray, do not ask for this pigeon."

The hawk took the King at his word and said: "Usinara! If such is your attachment to this pigeon, cut off from your body flesh equal to that of this bird and deliver it to me. I shall be satisfied with nothing else."

"Oh, what a boon you have bestowed on me! Willingly shall I cut a part of my flesh, weigh it against the pigeon and give it to you."

The King took a sword and cut the flesh out of his body. He placed the pigeon on one pan of the scale and his own flesh on the other. When the scales were lifted, the pigeon was found to be heavier than the quantity of the King's flesh. The King cut more of his own flesh to balance the scales. Yet, the scale of the pigeon still went under. Then, quickly the King got into the pan himself whole and entire and sat in it to balance the scales.

Then the hawk spoke to the King and said: "I am Indra, oh King, and this pigeon is Agni. We came to this sacrificial ground to know how constant you are to *dharma*. Since you have cut off your flesh to save the life of a little creature, your glory shall be unlimited. You will go to holy regions and your fame will endure for ever."

With that, Indra and Agni went to their celestial regions. In due time, Usinara too of the Sibi race went to heaven after filling the world with his pious and meritorious deeds.

15. EVILS OF GAMBLING

Nala, son of Veerasena, was the king of Nishada. Handsome as Manmatha himself, noble-minded, and always truthful, he had however a weakness for dice.

At that time, the lord of Vidarbha was a king of great prowess named Bheema. He had three sons and a daughter. The sons were called Dama, Daanta and Damana; the daughter was named Damayanti.

Damayanti was renowned throughout the land for her exquisite beauty. She radiated the charm of a celestial damsel. Not among the gods nor among the *yakshas*, not to speak of mere mortals, could be seen so lovely a maiden as she. Nor was such a one ever even heard of.

Reports of Damayanti's surpassing beauty reached Nala's ears. So too did Damayanti hear of the handsome Nala. Even before seeing each other, they fell in love which increased with the passing of days.

Once Nala saw a flock of golden-plumaged swans sporting in the forest. When he caught one of them it spoke to him in a human voice and pleaded: "King of Naishadaas, if you release me, I shall fly to Damayanti's palace and speak to her about you and your longing for her, and make her feel likewise for you, so that she will resolve not to marry any one except you. Pray allow me to go."

Hearing this, and eager to avail himself of the bird's service, he released it. The birds winged their way to Damayanti's palace. She was in the garden with her attendants and saw the birds descending from the sky. Each of the ladies-in-waiting pursued one of the birds and tried to catch it. Damayanti too did likewise and closed her hands on the bird which had brought Nala's message.

It spoke to her thus: "Damayanti! There is a king, Nala by name. He is the king of Nishada. In form and feature he is like the Aswins themselves. No man can approach him in beauty. If you become his wife, then your life will attain its fruition.

"You are the best of women; and he is the best among men. It is but meet that the best should be wedded to the best".

Hearing these words, Damayanti said: "Bird! Go to Nala and tell him that I love him passionately and long to marry him."

The bird agreed and, returning to Nala, conveyed Damayanti's message to him.

From that moment, Damayanti grew love-sick. The colour disappeared from her cheeks; she became pale and thin. Breathing heavily and with a far-away look, she moved about as one in a coma. Her eyes did not close in sleep by night or by day and she frequently gave vent to paroxysms of tears.

Her father saw all this and understood that his daughter had reached the age of marriage. He resolved to conduct a *swayamvara* for the princess to choose her husband and made it known to kings and princes far and near.

All of them hastened to Vidarbha, eager to win the hand of the princess. Nala too started, filled with hope and anxious too, to be present at the *swayamvara*.

Meanwhile, the sage Narada went to Indra's court and told him about the *swayamvara* of Bheema's daughter.

Upon that, Indra resolved to attend it himself as a candidate for the princess's hand. Agni, Yama, Varuna too accompanied Indra—each of them intent on winning Damayanti for himself.

On the way, they beheld Nala looking resplendent like the God of Love. Seeing him, the gods said to themselves: "What chance have we against Nala?"

Yet, they did not give up. They thought of a ruse. They accosted Nala and said: "King, we have heard that you are very truthful. Will you do us a service? Will you take a message from us?"

Unsuspectingly, Nala agreed and enquired, "Who may you be? What message have I to convey, and to whom?"

Indra replied for them all: "We are Indra, Agni, Yama and Varuna. Go to Damayanti and tell her: 'The gods are coming to the *swayamvara* to marry you. Choose one of them'."

Nala folded his hands and pleaded, "Great ones! I am myself going there for the same purpose. Pray do not make me carry a message against myself".

Indra assumed an angry mien: "What? You first promised to do our bidding, and now you go back on your word! That is not like a man who claims to speak the truth always. Go this moment, and deliver our message as you promised."

Nala was in a fix. He felt he had been trapped, but he had to keep his word. So, he betook himself to the apartments of Damayanti. Questioned by her as to who he was and what brought him there, he replied: "Auspicious one! Know me to be Nala. I have a message for you from the gods, Indra, Agni, Yama and Varuna. They bid you choose one of them for your husband at the *swayamvara*."

Damayanti heard what he said. "Let the gods attend the *swayamvara*. In their presence, and before all the assembled kings, I shall choose you only and none else. No discredit will attach to you. The gods too can have no cause to be angry with you".

Walking in the air in his happiness, Nala returned to the gods and reported to them what Damayanti had said. They gave him leave to go and he went to the *swayamvara* hall where kings and princes had gathered in all their finery.

Then Damayanti entered. The assembled suitors beheld her in wonderment. They were entranced by her loveliness and could not take their eyes away from her glowing beauty.

The lady-in-waiting led the princess among the ranks of the suitors announcing the virtues and powers of each. The princess moved on from suitor to suitor, paying little attention, her eyes seeking Nala.

But to her dismay, she beheld five Nalas—each exactly like the other. She could not identify the real Nala. She prayed to the gods with her palms joined in supplication. Trembling all over, she appealed to them: "I have set my heart on Nala after hearing the words of the swan, and I have mentally chosen him for my husband. I appeal to the gods to discover my Nala to me. If it is true that in thought, word or act, I have not swerved from my constancy to him, I pray to the gods to show my Nala to me".

The gods heard Damayanti's appeal, and moved by her sincerity, they enabled her to perceive the signs which distinguished Indra and his companions from the real Nala. They had no perspiration on their persons. Their eyelids did not close and their feet did not touch the earth. By these marks Damayanti knew that they were gods. Thus identifying her Nala and approaching him with great bashfulness and modesty, she draped the garland round his neck.

The gods, the rishis and those assembled in the royal hall applauded her and said in one voice: "Well done! Well done!"

Nala and Damayanti, clasping their hands, stood before the four gods in humble salutation and invoked their blessings. They were pleased with the happy pair and conferred their boons on Nala.

Indra promised to appear in person at the sacrificial rites which Nala might perform and assured him of a high place in heaven. Agni gave him the power to make a fire whenever he pleased and told him he would be as resplendent as himself. Yama endowed him with unrivalled mastery in the culinary art and with a will-power to be unswerving in the pursuit of *Dharma.* Varuna gifted him the power to get water anywhere he needed. Finally, all of them gave him a garland of celestial fragrance and returned to their heavenly abodes.

Then Bheema celebrated the wedding of his daughter in royal style. When the marriage ceremonies were over, Nala took his wife to his country and lived in supreme connubial bliss.

When the four gods were returning from the *swayamvara,* they saw Kali Purusha coming towards them attended by Dvaapara. "Where are you going, Kali, in such haste?" enquired Indra.

"Lord of the Devas!" replied Kali, "I am hastening to Damayanti's *swayamvara*".

"That is over, Kali. Damayanti has chosen Nala for her husband".

"Indeed! Is that so? How did she choose a mere mortal slighting the gods? She deserves to be punished for this", answered the malevolent Kali.

The gods rebuked him and said: "It is with our consent that she did so. Which maiden in the world would not choose Nala with all his eminent virtues? He is learned in the four Vedas; he is well-versed in the ancient lore; he pleases the gods by his daily sacrifices; he is the embodiment of truth, courage, wisdom, austerity, self-control and equanimity. Ahimsa is his rule of life. Always true to Truth he is of steadfast and pure conduct. Kali, rather than curse such a noble person, better curse yourself."

With that, the *Devas* departed. Seeing that they had gone, Kali addressed Dvaapara:

"I shall not suffer this insult. I must take my revenge on him. I shall enter into him. I shall see that he is banished from his kingdom and prevent him from living in happiness with Damayanti. In this, you must come to my help. Enter into the dice yourself."

Thus, bent on bringing about Nala's undoing, Kali went to Nishada. He had to wait there full twelve years before he found a chink in the armour of Nala's virtuous life.

One day, forgetting to wash his feet after answering the call of nature, Nala sat for his evening *sandhya* prayers. Then Kali found his chance and got into Nala.

He brought about a game of dice between Nala and his cousin, Pushkara and the stakes were high. While the game was on, Damayanti sent her two children Indrasenaa, the daughter and Indrasena, the son, to her father's court.

Soon Nala lost everything that he wagered, including his kingdom. Pushkara laughed at him in derision and said: "Everything that is yours has been won by me. Damayanti alone remains. Now offer her as your last wager".

When he heard these words, Nala shook with anger, but he was helpless. His heart seemed to burst with grief. Silently divesting himself of all his kingly ornaments he left the city, clad in a single piece of cloth. Damayanti too, clad in a length of rough cloth, followed him in meek silence.

Hunger gnawed at the king's vitals as he roamed beyond the outskirts of the city for many a weary day. When he saw a few young birds flying low, he tried to catch them in the folds of his cloth. All of them flew away together snatching away his cloth and carrying it in their beaks. And, as they rose, they mocked, "Foolish king! We are the dice who ruined you and now we carry away even the cloth which covered your nakedness. We cannot allow you to go forth even with this humble garment".

In this sad plight, Nala spoke to his wife and said: "By my insensate love for dice, I have come to this pass and brought misery to you too, my dear. Now, I abjure you by the right of a husband—listen to me. This road goes south, this road goes to Vidarbha, and that to Kosala."

Hearing these words, Damayanti said: "Lord! My heart writhes in intense anguish; my limbs refuse to move. I see what you wish to convey. But, bereft of your kingdom, having lost all your wealth, with nothing to clothe your person, in this terrible state, how can I abandon you in this dreary forest? My lord, when you are tired, when you are hungry, when you think dolefully of the happy days that were, then I will stand by you and help you to get over your misery. I have heard, my lord, that in the extremity of distress, there is no medicine like a good wife who alone can fill her husband with courage and cheer. Thus have I understood my duty, my lord, and I shall not swerve from that path."

Nala, pretending to be surprised at Damayanti's vehemence, asked, "Who told you I shall abandon you? Have no such fear."

Thus reassuring her, Nala wandered far into the forest leading his wife by hand. Hungry and tired, they entered an old, ruined *mantapa*. Naked in body, aching all over, being unaccustomed to the rugged stones and piercing thorns, covered with the dust of many days' wandering he lay down to sleep with Damayanti by his side. She too, weary and worn out, was soon overcome by sleep.

But Nala could not sleep for long. He woke up and debated within himself, "What harm if this were done; what good if undone? This, my dearest wife, so attached and loving, will have to suffer more and more on account of me. Separated from me, perhaps she may go back to her kinsmen. None can do her harm on the way; such is the power of her virtue. She is devoted to me. She is a *pativrata*. Her devotion to her husband is the armour that will shield her from all danger".

And then, turning to look at Damayanti, he mused. "How shall I cut a piece from her garment without waking her?"

Nala walked about the *mantapa,* pondering. Then his eyes fell on a sword lying in a corner. With it he cut a piece from his wife's cloth, wound it round his body and, abandoning her while she was yet sleeping soundly, he ran stealthily into the forest.

But, after he had gone some distance, he paused, wavered and turned back. Returning to the *mantapa* he saw his wife still fast asleep and wept like a child.

"She whom once the wind or the sun could not even see, she, my queen, lies asleep here in this wilderness with none to protect her. How sore will she lament when she wakes up and finds herself alone and covered with but a short piece of her garment! Abandoned by me, how will she live alone in this forest infested by beasts of prey! May all the suns in the sky, the *Vasus, Rudraas,* the *Ashvins,* and the *Maruts* protect you, my dearest, and add strength to your armour of Dharma!"

With these words, his understanding clouded by Kali, he again walked swiftly out of the place. He ran a few paces but paused again, and his heart riven by conflicting emotions, tiptoed his way back to see again his wife's lovely face, serene in sleep.

Kali's malevolent power pulled him away from his wife; but his love and tenderness for her drew him back.

Kali won at last and, casting a long, lingering look at his wife, the distressed king plunged into the dismal darkness of the forest.

After Nala left, Damayanti woke up from her sleep. She found that the King was not by her side. She was alone in that dreadful spot. Dismay, fear, grief—these gripped her heart. She wailed aloud. In deep distress, she called out: "Oh my lord! My king! My protector! Where are you? Why have you abandoned me? Ah! I am undone! I am lost! I am lonely! I am afraid!"

Thus did Damayanti weep aloud in the forest. She ran about here and there searching for her Nala. She sees a shadow moving somewhere betwixt the trees. She eagerly runs after it only to be sorely disappointed. She falls down in despair. She gets up again and sends forth a wail of distress which is echoed back to her from the depths of the forest.

Just then, a mighty python that was famished and hungry enveloped her in its coils. Even in that extremity, she thought not of herself so much as about her Nala and how he would suffer in the forest without her. As the dread reptile was closing her in its folds, she was terribly frightened and cried out to her husband: "Look at this serpent, my lord! See the danger in which I am. Why don't you run to my rescue this instant?"

But, she thought of herself only for a passing moment. Again she cried:

"Oh, sinless one, if this dread creature swallows me, when you are weak and weary, who will comfort you and bring you relief?"

The python had all but covered her in its folds. She stood in mortal danger to her life. At that moment there appeared a hunter who aimed his arrow at the serpent's head and it fell dead on the ground.

The hunter saw Damayanti standing before him all alone and trembling from head to foot. The piece of her garment which she wound about her person could not conceal her exquisite features of angelic beauty. The hunter was overpowered by lust and cast tell-tale glances at her.

Yet, nothing daunted, secure in the armour of her chastity, and by the power that it gave her, she pronounced a curse on him: "If it is true," said she, "that I have never vested my thoughts on anyone except my Nala, let this wretch of a hunter fall down dead."

Immediately, he fell on the ground lifeless like a tree consumed by fire.

Damayanti moved away from that spot searching for Nala, a vague fear about his safety gnawing at her heart. She cried out for him again and again. "Where are you, my lord! Come back to me this instant. I cannot stay here alone."

"Ah, here is a tiger," said she, "I shall query him about where my lord has gone."

"Tiger, you are the lord of the beasts in this jungle. You are the master of these domains. I am Damayanti, daughter of the King of Vidarbha. I am looking for my husband. Tell me, did you see him anywhere? If so, pray tell me and bring me comfort".

Thus did Damayanti speak and appeal to every bird and beast, to every plant and creeper, hill and dale to tell her where her Nala had gone.

As she wandered aimlessly along, her feet soon led her to the city of Chedipuri. The people there saw her walking in distraction, weak and forlorn with the dust of many days on her body, her hair hanging about in doleful disorder.

The queen-mother of the city saw her from her palace window. She beckoned to her maid and bade her bring the distraught woman to her presence.

Led by the maid, Damayanti stood before her, and in response to her query, narrated her story.

The queen took pity on her and asked her to stay in the palace while her men searched for Nala.

Abandoning his wife, Nala went far into the forest. Before him he saw a great fire and heard a cry of distress coming out of it. Unmindful of his own safety, he jumped right into the middle of the flames. There he saw a serpent writhing in the heat. He caught hold of it, hastened to a spot free from the raging fire and saved it from death.

The Serpent said: "Nala! I am the deadly Karkotaka. Tread ten paces from here and at the tenth step, I shall do you a great good."

Nala did as he was told. When he had taken the tenth step, the serpent struck him fiercely at his heel and ploughed his fangs into it. Upon that, Nala's features lost their beauty and their lustre. He became dark and deformed.

Consoling him, Karkotaka said: "I have brought about this disguise of your person so that men shall not be able to know you. Go forth from here calling yourself Baahuka. Go to Rituparna's palace. He is an expert in playing with dice. When you wish to regain your form and features, put on these clothes."

Meanwhile, Bhima, King of Vidarbha, sent his men in search of Nala and Damayanti. One of them was a *brahmana* named Sudeva, a friend of Damayanti's brother. He happened to go to Chedipuri and saw Damayanti in the palace there. Shorn of her bloom and lustre, she was the picture of misery grieving over the loss of her husband.

Damayanti saw Sudeva. She recognised him as her brother's friend. She was beside herself with grief and wept aloud. The Queen of the Chedis discovered from the *brahmana* that the distraught woman to whom she had given asylum was Damayanti, her own sister's daughter. She then sent her under proper escort to her father's palace. Seeing her and her woeful condition, everyone in Vidarbha was afflicted with great sorrow.

Upon Damayanti's request, King Bhima sent his men to search for Nala and bring news about him. She bade them go everywhere and wherever there was a concourse of men, to utter the following aloud:

"Oh, prince of gamblers! Where have you gone wearing the half of the cloth which you cut off from your wife abandoning her in the forest while she was fast asleep? Clad still in the other half of her cloth, pining with grief, she is eagerly looking out for your reurn. Do relent towards her and turn back."

Addressing the messengers, Damayanti said:

'Speak words such as these so that my lord may take pity on me. Remind him about the duty of a husband to protect his wife. Ask him how, being so wise and good, he had the heart to abandon his wife in the wilderness exposing her to unknown dangers."

The men dispersed in all directions carrying her message. They were gone for a long while. Damayanti waited in her father's palace in anxious expectation, tossed between hope and despair.

After quite a long time, a *brahmana*, Parnaada by name returned and told her:

"Gentle lady! In my quest for Nala, I went to Ayodhya of which Rituparna is king. I proclaimed your message in his court. Neither he nor his courtiers made any reply. Taking leave of them, I came away. Just then I was accosted by the King's charioteer, Baahuka famous for his horsemanship. It appears that he is also an expert cook. Hearing my words as you bade them speak them, he breathed heavily in uncontrollable grief and spoke as follows through his sobs:

'Well-born noble women protect themselves even when they face grave calamities. Such courage and constancy assure them a place in heaven. Even when abandoned by their husbands, they do not get angry.

'Why should she that you speak of be angry with her lord if she was abandoned by him in his grievous plight, when his mind was beclouded and his fortune had betrayed him?

'It does not behove her to be angry with one who lost the cloth which covered his nakedness even when he was seeking the means to appease his hunger.

'Whether treated well or ill, a noble wife never chides her husband who had been deprived of his kingdom, lost all his wealth and was overwhelmed with great sorrow.' This is what he said.

Damayanti turned to Sudeva and told him: "Sudeva, go this instant to Ayodhya and convey to King Rituparna that a second *swayamvara* is being arranged for Damayanti and the morrow has been fixed for it."

Sudeva carried the news to Rituparna who called Baahuka to his presence and said: "Baahuka, I wish to attend this second *swayamvara* of Damayanti. It is to take place tomorrow. Do you think you can take me thither in time for it?"

When Baahuka heard this, he was stunned. "What? Is Damayanti holding a *swayamvara* again? Has her sorrow overpowered her reason? Or, is this a ruse she has devised to discover me? It is true that I abandoned her. I did not do the right thing by her. But, then, should she choose a second husband? Ah! I forget. Women are generally fickle. Or, perhaps out of sight of me, her love for me has dried up. Or, has the intensity of her grief made her forget her duty? Well, I shall go to Vidarbha and ascertain the truth of this matter."

Resolving thus, Baahuka assured the King that his horses would take him to Vidarbha in time for the *swayamvara*. He made a careful choice among the steeds in the royal stables and picked the best breed which were exceedingly fleet of foot and yoked them to the chariot.

Rituparna got into it. He was amazed to see the horses literally flying in the air scarce appearing to touch the ground with their hoofs. He marvelled at their speed.

Just then, the King's mantle fell from his shoulder on the ground. He bade Baahuka rein in the horses and stop the chariot to pick up the mantle.

"We have sped many miles from the spot, Sire, it is not possible to stop and go back," said Baahuka.

Rituparna complimented him on his skill and added: "Baahuka, I too have learnt a few things in my life. For instance, merely looking at a tree, I can say how many fruits hang from its branches. Look at this tree. I say there are two thousand and ninety fruits in it. Count if you will and you will find I am correct."

Baahuka stopped the chariot near the tree, felled it to the ground and counted the fruits. They were even as the King had told.

Rituparna went on to say: "Baahuka, I am an expert not only in counting at a glance, but also in the game of dice."

"Really? If that is so, will you teach me this *akshavidya* in return for the *asvavidya* which I shall teach you?"

The King agreed and taught him the secrets of gambling with dice. Even as Baahuka received that knowledge, Kali came out of his body. As he saw him, Baahuka was about to pronounce a curse on him when, trembling all over, with his palms joined in humble supplication, Kali said: "Nala! pray withhold your anger. I shall make you renowned on earth for all time. You will be hailed as a *punyasloka*. Those who utter your name will have no fear of me. This I promise."

Nala restrained his anger and let Kali go.

The chariot sped on its way again and its deafening sound echoed all around and heralded its approach. They reached Vidarbha before sunset on the same day.

Damayanti heard of the arrival of Rituparna and his charioteer. She was eagerly looking forward to meeting her Nala. "If it is not he," thought she, "if my hopes are dupes, I shall plunge into fire carrying in my breast the memory of his noble virtues". So great was her excitement that she fell into a swoon.

When she came to herself, she went up the stairs of a chamber on top of the palace and looked through the window to catch a glimpse of the charioteer. Alas! to her intense disappointment, it was the dark and deformed Baahuka that met her eyes: not her handsome Nala. Yet, something told her it was Nala. She sent her maid to find out the truth. She conveyed her feelings to her father who had the charioteer ushered into her apartment.

Nala and Damayanti met each other. Nala was overpowered by grief. Tears streamed from his eyes. Choking with anguish Damayanti said: "Baahuka, did you see at any time a noble person who abandoned his sleeping wife and disappeared in the forest? He left his wife to her fate though he knew she was helpless, footsore and weary. I chose him for my husband in the presence of the gods, preferring him to them. How did he have the heart to leave me alone and unprotected?"

Struggling through his sobs, Nala replied: "My dearest: I was not myself when I lost my kingdom and when I stealthily went away from you in the forest. It was all the havoc wrought on me by Kali, gentle one! Now, it is all over. I have obtained my release from Kali. That is how

I am here.

"But, may I ask you: Would a woman wedded to a person who loved her passionately forget him and seek another's hand? The King has caused it to be announced everywhere that his daughter is thinking of a second marriage. Hearing this, I hastened to this city to know if it is true or not."

"This is a ruse which I made to discover you, my lord," said Damayanti, "who but you can cover this distance driving his chariot through a hundred *yojanas* and be here so soon? Now that we have been restored to each other, let me fall at your feet in humble supplication. I swear by all the gods, by all that is holy and pure that never for a moment have I been unfaithful to you."

Then there arose a voice from the sky which said: "Nala! Damayanti has not sinned. She is pure and chaste." And there was a shower of flowers on the happy pair confirming those words.

Assured of her constancy to him, Nala accepted Damayanti joyfully. Then remembering the serpent-king Karkotaka, he put on the garment which he had given him and regained his original features of surpassing beauty. Restored to her lord, Damayanti too was exceedingly happy.

Rituparna discovered to his surprise that his Baahuka was Nala himself. He taught him more of the secrets of dice in return for the equine lore and went back to his capital.

Nala now challenged Pushkara to a second game and won back all that he had lost to him. Noble as he was, he would not wreak vengeance on him. He embraced him with great affection again and again and sent him back to rule over his own kingdom.

[From the *Mahabharata,* Vana Parva]

16. THE DEFEAT OF DEATH

There was a great *rishi* whose name was Mrikandu. He had no son to continue his line. He felt very sad. But he knew that there was nothing that sincere prayer to God could not accomplish. So, observing the severest austerities, he prayed to God Siva. Siva appeared before Mrikandu and said:

"Mrikandu! I am pleased with your *tapas*. Ask for any boon that you desire."

Mrikandu requested to be favoured with a son.

"So be it," said Siva at once. But he added:

"Do you wish to have a son who will live long, but will be devoid of every virtue; or, do you wish to have a good son who will be short-lived? Choose."

Mrikandu was a *dharmatma*. So, he asked for a good, though short-lived son. But he prayed that he should also be learned and wise.

Siva granted the prayer. "You shall have a son who will live only for sixteen years. He will be very wise and virtuous." With that Siva disappeared.

Mrikandu came home extremely happy. He felt a great peace in his mind.

Not long after this, his wife Marudvati became pregnant. On an auspicious day, Mrikandu performed the *pumsavana* rite for the proper growth of the child which she carried in her womb. In the eighth month of pregnancy, he performed his wife's *seemanta* with a view to easy delivery.

In the fullness of time, Marudvati gave birth to a charming child who shone dazzling bright like the Sun-God himself. Great *rishis* like Veda Vyasa and others came to

Mrikandu's hermitage to have a look at the child. Sage Vyasa performed the *Jaatakarma,* and on the eleventh day, *naamakarana* was performed with proper ceremony. The boy was named Markandeya. The child received the blessings of the great and good men.

Every one was struck with wonder to see the infant's supremely handsome features and sparkling countenance. "Fortunate is Marudvati," they said, "to beget a child like this."

In the fourth month after birth, the child was taken out of the hermitage crossing the threshold and when it was six months, *annapraasana* was performed. Tonsure followed in the third year and, in the fifth year, Mrikandu performed the boy's *Brahmopadesa* and *Upaakarma* and initiated him into the sacred lore. Very soon Markandeya acquired a precocious mastery of the Vedas and all their branches.

Years passed. One day Mrikandu looked very sad and gave vent to uncontrollable grief. His wife too was in tears. Markandeya approached them and queried:

"What ails you that you both weep so bitterly?"

"It is for you that we grieve, my son," said the father. "We got you as a gift from Siva. But He told me that you would live only for sixteen years. The sixteen years end shortly. What shall we do if you die?"

Markandeya heard this. With great confidence and good cheer, he replied: "Father, do not weep; do not grieve over the prospect of my death. No, I shall not die. I shall strive for immortality. Is not our God, the great Siva who is *mrityunjaya,* the conqueror of death?" Is He not *kaalakala,* more powerful than death? Will Time terminate the life of one who is a devotee of the timeless God?

Heartened by these words of their son, the parents felt greatly relieved and happy. They said:

"Dear child! Truly you have discovered a way to save us from a great calamity. Yes; Siva is our sure refuge; seek Him at this moment when death threatens you and live. Long ago, He saved Swetaketu from the jaws of death. He rescued Silada's son who was eight years of age and, taking him to Kailas, stationed him as His Nandi. When the whole world was in dread of imminent destruction by the *kaalakoota* poison which came to the surface when the celestials churned *ksheerasaagara,* Siva took it in the palm of His hand and swallowed it to save the universe. And so, He will surely save you too in this predicament that threatens you."

Receiving his father's words as his *upadesa* in the worship of Siva, Markandeya hastened to the shores of the southern ocean and installed a Linga of Siva there with due ceremony. Bathing thrice—morning, noon and night—he worshipped Siva. At the end of each worship, he sang prayers to his God and danced in an ecstasy of devotion. Siva was mightily pleased with the fervour with which Markandeya worshipped Him.

That night, finishing his worship, Markandeya was about to sing his prayers. Just then, relentless Time personified as Yama came there, attended by his instrument, Death. Of terrible aspect and forbidding mien, he was dreadful to see.

Approaching Markandeya, he cast his noose over the boy's person. Turning to him, Markandeya said:

"Stay; stay for a while. Bear with me while I recite this prayer to Siva. I will not move from here before I finish it. Nothing is dearer to me than these prayers; no, not even my life."

Yama looked at the boy, smiled and said:

"Foolish boy! Have you not heard the counsel of your venerable ancestors? If one does not acquire merit in his youth, he will be helpless when he grows old, like a destitute traveller on a lonely way. If you wish to be happy all the year long, you should have striven for it in the early months. To be happy after death, you must have earned merit while alive. Work in the forenoon for what you wish to have in the afternoon. Time marches on and none can stay it. It does not wait while you are acquiring merit; but it drags you to your doom when the fatal hour has struck. None can die before his time even if a hundred darts are aimed at him. But when the moment has come, the point of a gentle blade of grass is enough to finish a man's life. None can escape me. Thousands of kings and hundreds of Indras have succumbed to me and have been led to my abode. Therefore, sinless though you are, your days on earth are over. You must meet your doom. Do not get angry with me. This instant you must die".

Markandeya heard what Yama said. Still engaged in his worship, he remonstrated Yama and said: "Remember, those who come in the way of *Sivabhaktas* doing their prayers will surely perish. I warn you; even as a king guards his servants, Siva keeps His devotees from harm. You are powerless before *Sivabhakta*, you and your emissaries."

Yama's eyes turned red with rage. Thundering a roar that made the worlds tremble, he said: "Fool! Do you hope to escape my clutches? Know that countless Brahmas, as numerous as the sands on Ganga bed have met with their death at my hands. But, why indulge in idle talk? Now look at my power. Let me see."

With that Yama flung the noose round Markandeya's neck and tried to draw him forcibly to himself. At the moment, the Linga burst open and Siva took shape and emerged from it. Raising His foot, He kicked Yama on his chest with such force that he reeled helplessly and was hurled back from where he stood.

Markandeya saw that Yama was vanquished. He bowed his head before his God and praised Him with heart and voice as follows:

रुद्रं पशुपतिं स्थाणुं नीलकण्ठमुमापतिम् ।
नमामि शिरसा देवं कि नो मृत्युःकरिष्यति ॥
कालकण्ठं कलामूर्तिं कालाग्निं कालनाशनम् ।
नमामि शिरसा देवं कि नो मृत्युःकरिष्यति ।
नीलकण्ठं विरूपाक्षं निर्मलं निरुपद्रवम् ।
नमामि शिरसा देवं कि नो मृत्युःकरिष्यति ॥
वामदेवं महादेवं लोकनाथं जगद्गुरुम् ।
नमामि शिरसा देवं कि नो मृत्युःकरिष्यति ॥
देवदेवं जगन्नाथं देवेशमृषभध्वजम् ।
नमामि शिरसा देवं कि नो मृत्युःकरिष्यति ॥

Pleased with His devotee, Siva assured him that his years on earth would be endless. He made Markandeya one of the immortals and then vanished back into the Linga.

Markandeya came home and his parents were intensely happy to see him come back alive. He told them of the boon that Siva had bestowed on him and they too blessed their son. With their consent, Markandeya left on a pilgrimage to visit the *punyakshetras*.

Yama too prayed to Siva in meek submission and went back to his abode.

[From *Padma-Purana*]

17. BACK FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH

Asvapati was the King of Madra. He was a *dharmaatma* constant to Truth. He performed a number of sacrifices and used to give away without restraint. He was a righteous King ever watchful of the welfare of all his people.

He was getting old. But he had no child. That made him sad. To beget a son, he wished to invoke the grace of God. He observed the rules of an austere life, eating only just enough to keep himself alive and that only at the sixth part of each day. He offered ten thousand oblations into the fire uttering the *Savitri Mantra.*

Savitri Devi was pleased with the King. She rose from the fire and bade him ask for the boon that he desired. Asvapati prayed that he might be blessed with a plentiful progeny.

Savitri replied: "I know already that you would ask for this boon. I have spoken to the Grandsire, Brahma and He will dower you with a daughter of surpassing splendour. That will happen very soon. And now, do not say aught in reply."

Asvapati received the assurance with due humility. With that, Savitri Devi vanished from the spot.

Not long after this, the first among the queens bore an infant of exquisite beauty. It was a girl. It was Savitri Devi's gift and the effect of the Savitri *homa*. So, the King decided to call her Savitri. The child grew to be the embodiment of everything that was auspicious, and soon attained the state of maidenhood.

Shining bright like a golden image, she appeared as a divine damsel. So superlative was her beauty, that no one had the boldness to ask for her hand. On an auspicious day, after finishing her bath and worshipping the gods, she requested the Brahmanas to offer oblations in the sacrificial fire. She took the *prasaada* of the worship to her father, and after making obeisance at his feet she placed it in his hands and stood at his side.

The King beheld her exquisitely beauteous form. He saw that she had reached the age of marriage. But none volunteered to marry her. He was deeply concerned over this.

Addressing his daughter, the King said: "Dear child! The time has come when I must give you away to a young man worthy of you. But no suitor has so far come forth. Therefore, seek your husband yourself, one who will be equal to you in every respect. Having chosen him, come back and tell me and I shall bestow you on him after due thought. It has been said of old: 'Despicable is the father who does not give away his daughter to a bridegroom. The husband that is unmindful of his wife deserves to be censured. So too is a son who does not protect his mother after his father is dead.' Therefore, my child, go forth and choose a husband. Save me from being despised by the gods."

The king spoke and sent her along with her attendants who were commissioned to guard her from harm. Savitri bent before her father in loving reverence. Receiving his blessings, she sped in her golden car to the peaceful hermitages of *tapasvins* in the forest. Worshipping the feet of the aged anchorites, she roamed joyfully in those sacred regions. And, as she visited every place, she made lavish gifts of wealth to holy persons and obtained their blessings.

Some time later, the Sage Narada visited the King and was received by him with due reverence. When the two were talking together, in came Savitri after visiting holy spots as ordered by her father. She fell at their feet in humble salutation.

Narada queried whither had the princess gone and whence she had returned. "Why have you not given her in marriage yet?" he asked.

Asvapati, the King replied: "It is for that purpose that I sent her, to seek a husband for herself. Holy Sir, let us learn from her whom she has chosen."

Desired by her father to convey the result of her mission, with a heart filled with joy, Savitri replied: "Dyumatsena was once the King of the Salva country. He became blind. His enemies attacked his kingdom, captured it and banished the king into the forest with his queen and his infant prince. Though exiled he bears his misfortune bravely; he leads a righteous life and spends his days doing *tapas*. His son, born in the palace, was brought up in the hermitage. He has since grown to be a handsome youth. He is known as Satyavan. I have given my heart to him and chosen him for my husband."

Upon this, Narada felt very much agitated and said to himself: "Alas! What a dire misfortune has Savitri invited to herself! In her ignorance of what is going to happen to Satyavan, she has set her heart on him."

Then, turning to the King, he said: "Yes: it is true that both the father and mother of this youth are wedded to truth and quite appropriately have they given the name Satyavan to their son."

The King asked: "Is the prince bright and wise, forbearing and brave, true of speech and loving towards his father?"

"In splendour he is like the Sun himself," answered Narada, "in intelligence, he is Brihaspati, the teacher of the gods; in prowess, he is like Indra and, like Mother Earth, he is patient and forgiving."

The King asked again: "Is he generous in giving? Is he reverential to the holy ones? Is he handsome and lovely to behold?"

"Oh! He is generous like Sankriti, true like Sibi, magnanimous like Yayati, beautiful like the Asvins, and perfectly self-controlled; he is gentle and true in all his ways. He is known among the good men everywhere as righteous beyond compare."

"You have recounted the prince's virtues, Sire," said the King, "tell me, pray, if he has any fault."

Narada replied: "Alas, one defect of the youth eclipses all his virtues; and it cannot be avoided. In a year from now, he is destined to die."

The King heard this with deep regret. "Savitri!" said he, "choose another for your husband. I shall not give you to one who is fated to be short-lived."

At these words of her father, Savitri said: "Father dear, Death comes to a man but once; a daughter can be given away but once. Once only can a man say 'I give'. These three can happen only once.

"Be he long-lived or short-lived, be he good or evil, once I have chosen him to be my husband, I shall not make a second choice.

"A thing is settled in the mind; then it is uttered in speech and action follows in accord with it. My decision is irrevocable."

Looking at the King, Narada said: "Your daughter is steadfast and will not waver from her resolve. It will not be possible to make her change her mind. And, there is none like Satyavan, so plentifully endowed with every conceivable virtue. Therefore, reconcile yourself to your daughter's choice and give her in marriage to him."

The King received the words of the *rishi* with respect and humility and Narada departed from there.

Asvapati quickly made arrangements for the marriage. He took with him all that was needed for it and with a large retinue of his court, he soon reached Dyumatsena's hermitage travelling to it on foot from the outskirts of the forest. He saw the blind King seated on *kusa* grass under a *saala* tree. Receiving his guest with proper ceremony, Dyumatsena queried him about the purpose of his visit.

"This is my daughter, O King! Savitri by name." said the King, "I have come to request you to accept her as your daughter-in-law."

Dyumatsena replied, "Exiled from our kingdom, we have become *tapasvins* in this forest. Your daughter has grown in the luxury of the palace and is a stranger to the hard and exacting life of a forester. How can she live this hard life with us consenting to its hardships?"

Asvapati said: "My daughter knows, and I know too, that joy and misery come and go. Pray do not put me away. I have decided and I shall not falter. I beg of you, do not deny my wish. I have sought you as my friend. Equal is my status to yours and so, take my daughter as your daughter-in-law. Make her your son Satyavan's wife."

Dyumatsena: "Once I did desire this alliance with you. But then, my exile made it impossible for me to realise it. If you are intent on it now, well, let there be no hindrance to it."

Gathering all the *brahmanas* and the *rishis* of the place, Asvapati gave his daughter away to Satyavan with prescribed ceremony. His purpose fulfilled, glad in heart, he returned to his kingdom.

Satyavan was happy in his bride and loved her for her virtues. Savitri too was overjoyed that she got the husband that she desired. Soon after her royal father left the hermitage, she divested herself of all her jewels and clothed herself in a raiment of bark, like a *rishipatni* that she now became. By her devoted service, by her tenderness and self-denial, she pleased every one in the hermitage. She ministered to the old king and queen day after day, and performed her duties to them in a spirit of worship and dedication. And she served her husband as she should, regaling him with her loving speech and sparkling laughter.

Thus did days pass on happily in that *tapovana*. But Savitri carried in her heart the load of the words spoken by Narada about Satyavan.

A year went by. The fatal day for Satyavan was drawing near. Savitri was keeping count of the days. She knew that her husband was fated to die in four days. She decided to observe the *Triraatra* penance. Dyumatsena heard what his daughter-in-law had decided to do. Trying to dissuade her from it, he said, "Child! It is a difficult penance that you have undertaken. It is not easy for one so tender like you to fast for three days and nights."

"Grieve not, Sire" said Savitri, "I shall go through it quite all right."

"Well, I don't have the power to ask you to break it. I must give you my blessings. Go through it successfully."

Savitri began her fast. She became wan and lean like a stick.

"Tomorrow is my husband fated to die" she rolled this thought in her mind and kept awake all through the night in anguish and anxiety.

The day dawned. The Sun was coming up in the sky. Savitri went through her morning ablutions. She approached the *brahmanas,* the aged, her father-in-law and mother-in-law. She made her *pranaams* to them in proper order and stood before them with her palms joined in supplication and prayer.

The *tapasvins* beheld her, the picture of duty and humility. "May you live long with your husband!" they said in one voice blessing her.

Just then, lifting an axe on to his shoulder, Satyavan started to go into the forest.

"No, not by yourself, my Lord! I shall go with you; you shall not go alone today."

"You have not been into the forest before, my dear," said Satyavan; "there is no proper path in the woods. And you have become weak and thin by your fasts. How can you walk in the rough forest?"

Savitri: "My fast has not made me weak. I am eager to go with you. Pray, do not forbid me."

"If you have decided that way," said Satyavan, "I shall gratify your desire. But, first, obtain leave of my parents so that they may not find fault with me."

Savitri approached her father-in-law and mother-in-law and speaking with humility, said: "My husband goes to the forest to procure fruits and faggots. If you will please permit me, I shall go with him today. For, I cannot bear to be away from him today. And I have not stepped out of the hermitage all this year since I came here. I long to see the forest in all its verdant glory."

Dyumatsena said: "Since she came to us, Savitri has not till this day made a request to us. Let her wish be granted. Child, take care of Satyavan on the way; do not be neglectful of him."

The happy pair then hied to the forest talking pleasantly all the way and looking at the things of beauty at every turn.

And yet, Narada's words were knocking at Savitri's heart and her thoughts were anxiously rivetted to the dread moment.

Going deep into the forest, Satyavan began to pluck fruits and fill his wallet with them. Then he started cutting the branches of trees with his axe. While doing so, he suddenly began to perspire profusely. The physical strain brought on a severe headache. Turning to his wife, he said: "Ah! how my head aches! Savitri! my limbs seem to fail me. I feel a pain near the heart, a peculiar uneasiness afflicts me all over. My head seems as if it is pierced by innumerable darts. I am unable to stand, dear; I feel like lying down and sleeping if I can."

Savitri hastened to Satyavan's side, sat on the ground and placed his head on her lap.

She thought about what Narada had foretold and began calculating the day, the hour and the moment.

And lo! there stood before her an eerie person, dreadfully dark, clad in red, with a diadem on his head and a noose in his hand. He approached Satyavan and stood close to him.

Savitri saw him. Quickly she lifted Satyavan's head from her lap and gently placed it on the ground. She joined her palms in supplication and, trembling all over, addressed the terrifying form and said: "Your form is superhuman.

You appear to be a Spirit of the sky. Pray tell me, who are you and what is your desire?"

Yama replied: "Savitri, thou art a *pativrata* and a *tapasvini*. Hence thou art fit to be spoken to by me. *I am Yama*. Thy husband Satyavan has been destined to be short-lived. His death is at hand. *I have come to take his life*."

Composing herself, Savitri queried: "My Lord! I have heard that you send your emissaries for such a purpose. How is it that you yourself have come here?"

Yama: "Gentle one! Satyavan is not like other mortals. He has been ever faithful to the code of his *dharma*. Beautiful in his features, he bears a noble character. My emissaries do not deserve to lead him, pure and good as he is. Hence, I have come myself."

With that, Yama cast his noose on the sleeping Satyavan and pulled out from his body a *purusha* of the size of a thumb.

Satyavan turned into a corpse and his body assumed an aspect not pleasing to behold.

With his victim's *praana* in his noose, Yama turned southward to his abode.

Overwhelmed by grief, Savitri followed the God of Death. She went close behind him.

Yama saw her at his heels. He turned to her. "Savitri," he said, "turn back. Attend to the funeral rites of your lord. Thus far alone canst thou come, and no farther."

Savitri persisted, saying: "Where my lord is led, where he goes, that is my place too. This is the ancient rule.

"Look! My steps are not halted, thanks to the merit of my austerities, my services to my lord's father and mother and my love and loyalty to him, and also by your favour.

"Those who know the truth have declared that when two persons walk seven steps together, that makes them fast friends. And so, I have become your friend. Pray, give me leave by virtue of that friendship to tell you what I have in mind.

"One who has not attained self-control and self-knowledge cannot go through the *asramas* of life properly and it is only as a householder, a *grihastha*, that one can practise *dharma*. All other *asramas* are maintained by a *grihastha*. They depend on him for their proper functioning. So, a householder's life is more important than that of a Vaanaprastha or a Sannyasin."

Yama was pleased with Savitri's speech. He said: "Savitri, I am fascinated by your words, so sweetly spoken and so pregnant with meaning. So ask a boon of me, any boon except the life of Satyavan."

"My father-in-law," said Savitri, "has been exiled from his kingdom and has lost his eye-sight. Grant that he may regain his eyes and live gloriously as before."

"I grant thee thy prayer, sinless one! It shall be even as you desire. But now, what a long way you have come with me! Turn back before you become weary."

"Shall I ever become weary, Oh God, when I am with my husband? Where he goes, surely, that is the way for me too; where you take him, there I follow.

"And now, again listen to me, I pray. Association with the good, even for a moment, is highly fruitful. To be accepted as their friend is better than that. To live for ever in their company will bring lasting good. So one should seek the company of the righteous."

Yama: "How pleasing to the mind are your words! How nourishing to the intellect! How lofty is their import!

Savitri, ask for another boon and I shall grant it—but, no, not your husband's life."

Savitri: "My father-in-law's kingdom has been wrested from him. May he get it back! May he not swerve from *dharma*! This is the second boon that I crave from you."

Yama: "Soon shall he get back his kingdom. He shall not resile from his *dharma*. Now that you have obtained what you wanted, go back. Do not tire yourself further."

Savitri: "Truly, Oh God! are you called Yama, for, all beings of the world are bound by your decrees, and you lead them to their destiny by virtue of those decrees. Now, please listen:

"The eternal *dharma* of the good is to do no injury to others in act, thought or speech and to be kind and considerate to everyone. Unfortunately, worldly men are dead to devotion and duty even as my husband lies here devoid of life. The truly good show mercy even to their enemies who seek it at their hands."

Yama was moved by Savitri's wise words. He said: "Savitri, as water is to a thirsty man, so are to me the words that you have spoken. I must give you another boon. Ask for what you want— but it shall not be your husband's life."

Savitri said: "My father pines for want of a son to continue his line. Bless him with a hundred sons. This shall be the third boon from you."

"So be it," said Yama. "Now that your prayer is answered, go back. You have travelled very far."

"Walking by my husband," said Savitri, "I am not conscious of distance. On the other hand, my mind flees faster than my feet can carry me. As we two walk together, please listen to what I say:

"You are the son of Vivasvaan; hence are you called Vaivasvata by the wise. You deal out equal laws to the people of the earth. That is why you are known as Dharmaraja. One does not repose in oneself the confidence that one has in the righteous. Therefore, everyone wishes particularly to be wedded to righteousness. It is goodness of heart that evokes the confidence of all creatures. That is why a man places confidence in the good."

Yama said: "Words like these, noble lady, I have not heard from anyone else. I am pleased with them. So, ask for a fourth boon from me—anything excepting your husband's life—and then, go back."

Savitri replied: "Grant that to me may be born a hundred sons of great strength and valour. This is my fourth boon from you."

Yama agreed: "Yes; a hundred sons of immense strength and prowess will be born to you and you will be happy with them. Now, surely you must be very tired. You have come with me very far indeed, do go back."

Savitri persisted and spoke to Yama again: "The good are established in *dharma* for ever. They neither tire nor do they feel any affliction. The company of the good is never without fruit. The good have nothing to fear from the good. The good lead the Sun across the sky by their Truth. They support the Earth by their *tapas*. They determine the Past and Future. Living with the good, the good never come to grief. Knowing this to be the ancient rule, the good live for others, not for themselves. A good deed is never lost. It does no harm to one's own interest or to one's self-respect. Such are the ways of the righteous who, for that reason, become the guardians of the world."

Yama heard what Savitri said and exclaimed: "How wisely and truly you speak about the eternal *dharma*! How pleasing is your speech, how apt are your words! and how full of great meaning! With every word that you utter, I am drawn to you immensely. Now ask for a boon beyond compare."

Savitri quickly replied: "Salvation cannot be secured except by the merit of good deeds. Even so are the boons that you have conferred on me. Grant that my Satyavan may live again. Life without my husband is death to me. Without my lord, I desire no joy. Heaven itself has no charms for me without him. There can be no prosperity for me without him to share it. I do not wish to live when he is gone. You granted me the boon of a hundred sons; but you are taking away my husband. Make your words true and let Satyavan live again!"

Upon that, Yama released Satyavan's life from his noose. Pleased with Savitri's loyalty to her husband, he said: 'See, I have released your lord from my hold. He will get up hale and hearty. He will live with you for four hundred years and both of you shall engage yourselves in acts of *dharma* and attain great renown. He will beget a hundred sons by you. All of them shall be great Kshatriyas and their lineage shall be unending. Your father too shall beget a hundred sons by your mother. They shall be known as Maalavyas and they will be bold and powerful like Indra himself."

Conferring all these boons on Savitri, Yama bade her go back, and himself returned to his abode.

Savitri hastened to the spot where lay her husband's corpse. Seeing him lying on the ground, she approached him, and sitting by his side, lifted his head on her lap.

Satyavan slowly regained his consciousness. Like one returning home from a long sojourn in a strange land, he looked at her and devoured her with his loving eyes.

"I seem to have slept for long, Savitri," said he. "Why did you not wake me up? Who was that dark person who dragged me along?"

"Yes, my lord!" replied Savitri, "you have been asleep for long on my lap. That celestial being has gone away. He was Yama, who leads men to death."

Meanwhile the aged King whose sight had been restored by Yama's boon and Satyavan's mother were getting anxious about Savitri and Satyavan. They searched for them as far as they could possibly go. They could not see them anywhere and they were in sore distress. They feared that the worst had happened to their son and his wife.

The *rishis* who gathered round them tried to set their fears at rest. A *rishi* known as Survacha said: "I am sure they are alive. For where there is Savitri who practises *tapas*, self-control, and is austere in conduct, no harm will ever befall."

Another, Gautama, said: "I have learnt the Vedas with all their *angas*. I have done a lot of *tapas*. As a true *brahmachari*, I have served my teachers and pleased them by my conduct. I have observed all vows and have fasted according to rule. By the strength of all the merit that I have thus earned, I make bold to declare that Satyavan most certainly lives."

His disciple added: "My teacher's words can never be false. Surely Satyavan does live."

The *rishis* declared: "Savitri carries on her person all the marks which make for auspiciousness. They indicate that she will never lose her husband. That is proof positive that Satyavan yet lives."

The Sages Bharadwaja and Dalbya too gave the same assurance.

Apastamba said: "The birds and animals of the forest convey through their voices that Satyavan is alive. That you have regained your eye-sight is a good sign pointing to the same fact."

Dhaumya added: "Your son is richly endowed with noble virtues. He is certainly destined to be long-lived and so he is alive: of that I am quite sure."

While the *rishis* were thus assuring the King that nothing untoward had happened to his son, in came Savitri with her husband and there was great rejoicing on the part of everybody. The King was happy that he had regained his son. Savitri and Satyavan were happy to see him with his sight restored.

Soon after this, the King's ministers came to the hermitage bringing him tidings of the defeat of his enemy and of his restoration to the throne. The royal pair went back to the kingdom and celebrated their reunion with their subjects. And, Savitri too lived happily with Satyavan and in due course begot a hundred sons as blessed by Yama.

18. THE GOD THAT DID NOT FAIL

Jaya and Vijaya were celestials who stood guard at the entrance to Vaikuntha, the transcendent abode of Lord Vishnu, the Protector of the Universe. One day, the sons of Brahma wished to have an audience with Lord Vishnu and they approached the gates of Vaikuntha. The guards declined to admit them as they were not properly clad. Brahma's sons got angry and cursed them to be born on earth as *asuras*.

Accordingly, Jaya and Vijaya took birth as Hiranyakasipu and Hiranyaksha. True to the *aasuric* nature which they had acquired, they perpetrated heinous iniquities against the moral order of the world, molesting Brahmanas at their sacrifices, attacking the innocent and waging open war against Lord Vishnu Himself. In their new demoniac disposition they forgot their previous office at the gates of Vaikuntha.

Lord Vishnu assumed the Varaahavatara and destroyed Hiranyaksha. Hiranyakasipu was enraged by the killing of his brother and he vowed vengeance on Lord Vishnu. Making himself the lord of the worlds, he ordered that none in his domains should render worship to Lord Vishnu. He desecrated every rite being performed in His honour and inflicted untold hardships on Vishnubhaktas and those who spent their days in the study of the Vedas and the performance of Vedic *yajnas*.

Hiranyakasipu wished to acquire enormous might and immortality. He performed the most austere *tapas* of unprecedented rigour for a very long period. Standing on his toe, with arms uplifted and looking at the sky, he remained in deep concentration for a number of years. Smoke issued out from his head owing to the heat of his *tapas* and threatened to consume the world. The Devas got terribly frightened and begged of Brahma to grant the boon which Hiranyakasipu desired.

Brahma appeared before him and said: "I am pleased with your intense *tapas,* Hiranyakasipu, and I am ready to grant you a boon. Ask for what you desire."

"If you are so pleased with me Sire," said the Asura, "grant that death should not come to me by any man, beast or missile. I should not die inside or outside any building, by day or by night, on earth or in the sky, by the living or by the non-living, by the Devas or by the *asuras* or by any creature. And grant me lordship over everything."

"So be it," said Brahma and vanished.

Conscious of his invincible strength, and sure that no known instrument could compass his death, Hiranyakasipu became a veritable scourge. He harassed and terrorised good and holy persons and committed terrible atrocities on the devotees of Lord Vishnu.

He had four sons. One of them was a charming lad named Prahlada. Even inside his mother's womb, he had grown in devotion to Lord Vishnu. Of noble virtues, he was the soul of goodness. His mind rested on God, and his heart flowed forth in love and tenderness to all creatures. Reverential to elders, he had an infinite solicitude for the welfare of all men. He respected his teachers as gods. Controlling his senses, he lived in perfect tranquillity and peace. He always lived in God, often losing himself in the transports of his God-intoxication.

Hiranyakasipu could not bear to see his son grow up in devotion to his bitterest enemy. To erase from Prahlada's mind every trace of *Vishnu-bhakti,* he sent his son to school ordering the teacher to train him up in the "proper" manner. The teacher took charge of the boy and began to teach him as ordered by his ferocious father.

After some time, Hiranyakasipu wished to see how far his son had progressed in losing his *bhakti* to Vishnu and sent for him and his teacher. Both were taken to his presence. Happy to see his son, Hiranyakasipu placed him on his lap, clasped him fondly and said:

"Tell me, my child, what is it that you have learnt in your *guru's* place."

Prahlada replied: "Listen, dear father, I shall tell you the essence of what I have learnt. Listen to my words with perfect equanimity. This I have learnt—that I should adore Him who has no beginning, no middle or end, Who is unborn, Who neither grows nor declines, Who never fails, Whose children are all these creatures of this world, Who is the Supreme cause of the Universe."

Hiranyakasipu was enraged. His eyes were red with fury. His lips were quivering with anger. He turned to the teacher and roared: "Thou foul Brahmin! This boy praises my enemy to my own face. What is this that thou hast taught him?"

The *guru* trembled with terror and pleaded, "Your Majesty, pray don't be angry with me. Not taught by me does your son speak thus."

At this, Hiranyakasipu turned to Prahlada and asked, "Then who taught this to you? Your teacher says he did not teach this."

With great humility Prahlada replied: "The only teacher of the entire world, father, is Lord Vishnu and He resides in the heart of every one. Who else can teach anybody?"

Hiranyakasipu: "Who is this Vishnu of whom you speak so highly again and again? Who can be the lord of the universe when I am here?"

Prahlada: "He whom words cannot describe, Who can be known only by the *yogis*, He from Whom this universe is born, the Supreme Lord that is Lord Vishnu, father."

Hiranyakasipu: "Surely you wish to die at my hands; else, you would not dare to speak of your Vishnu as the Lord of all and that too in my presence!"

Prahlada: "Father, He is the Lord not only to myself. He is the Lord of all men; why, He is your Lord too. He it is that ordains and sustains everything in the universe."

Hiranyakasipu: "Evidently some evil spirit has entered your mind, you fool. That is why you speak as you should not speak."

Prahlada: "That spirit, father, is Lord Vishnu Himself. It is not only in my body that He resides. He has got into the inmost being of every particle of the entire universe. Father, it is He that makes me, you and everybody else act; for, He is everywhere and in everything."

Hiranyakasipu could stand his son's talk no longer. "Take him away," he growled, "and see to it that he is taught properly."

Prahlada was taken back to the *guru's* place. Like a true pupil, he served his teacher according to rule.

Some days passed and Hiranyakasipu sent for his son again. "Child," said he, "tell me now what you have learnt."

Prahlada replied: "He from whom the Prakriti and the Purusha have emanated, He who is the source of all that moves and does not move, the cause of all the world, may that Lord Vishnu protect us."

"You wretch! What did you say?" shouted Hiranyakasipu trembling with rage, "You are a renegade to my enemy's side. You have brought infamy to my race. You deserve to die."

He called his men-at-arms and commanded them to kill the boy with their weapons. Up sprang the soldiers with mighty weapons and began to attack the tender boy with sword and lance.

"Lord Vishnu resides," exclaimed Prahlada, "in these weapons, in you and in me. By that faith I know that these weapons can do me no harm."

Though hit by a hundred weapons, Prahlada stood undaunted and not a hair of his body was hurt.

Hiranyakasipu relented: "Fool!" he urged, "give up this praise of my enemy and I promise I shall pardon you."

Prahlada: "Father, even a momentary thought of Lord Vishnu is enough to remove the fear of life, old age and death. When He resides in my heart, what fear can dwell in me?"

Hiranyakasipu could scarcely contain his rage. Furious, he summoned the most deadly serpents and bade them plunge their fangs into Prahlada's body and despatch him quickly to the place of Death.

At once, Takshaka and other venomous serpents sprang at the boy and injected their poison into every pore of his body. But Prahlada's mind was fixed on his God. He had no consciousness of his body. He was lost in the ecstasy of his contemplation.

The serpents cried out: "Our fangs are broken, our hoods tremble in exhaustion. There is an unspeakable dread in our hearts. We have not been able to puncture even a bit of this boy's skin. Pray, Your Majesty, let us withdraw from this."

Hiranyakasipu then ordered his mighty tuskers to trample on his son and destroy him. "Though born of my loins," said he, "he will bring about my undoing even as the spark of fire produced by the friction of the *arani* sticks consumes its source."

Then there came out the *diggajas* tall as mountain peaks and of exceeding might. They threw Prahlada on the ground and struck at him with their mighty tusks.

Prahlada closed his eyes and thought of Govinda. The tusks were broken to a thousand pieces and the huge creatures lumbered away trumpeting in pain and fear.

"Withdraw the elephants," commanded Hiranyakasipu. "Make a great fire. Let the wind blow on it and into the raging flame throw this disobedient son!"

The attendants piled logs of wood, set fire to them and pushed Prahlada into the raging flames.

Standing in the midst of the flames, he said: "Father, though enveloped by this fire which rages so fiercely aided by the wind, see, I am still absolutely untouched. It is cool all around and I feel as if I am sitting on lovely lotuses."

The *asura gurus* approached Hiranyakasipu and said: "Your Majesty, restrain your anger. We shall take him back and teach him to hate your enemies. After all, he is a child and uninformed. That is why he speaks as he does. If we fail to wean him away from his adoration of Vishnu, then we shall find other means to punish him."

Hiranyakasipu bit his lips; but there was no alternative he could think of and the teachers led Prahlada back to their place.

The *gurus* took Prahlada back and began to teach him as their King desired. The boy listened to them in patience. When they had finished, he spoke thus to them and to his fellow-pupils:

"Listen to my words. Birth, childhood, youth and old age—these come to us all in inevitable succession. At the end, we die. Birth follows death. Our entire life is one of continuous sorrow from birth to death. Fools delight in little pleasures of the moment like eating to appease hunger, or warming oneself to resist the cold. Blinded by lust, others yield to the allurements of the flesh and lose themselves in those transient delights.

"They subject themselves to every privation mistaking it for a source of happiness. What is a human body but skin and bone, nerve and muscle, blood and mucus, the foulest of refuse all packed and dressed up to beguile the unwary and the ignorant? The world is a vale of tears. In this sea of sorrow, sin and suffering, the only refuge for us all is the Supreme Lord, Narayana Himself.

"Remember, time is fleeting, our days are numbered. Do not say: 'I am still young; I shall enjoy life now. I shall strive for God when I become old'. For, when old age comes, you will not have the strength of body or of will to think of what is good for you. Childhood is lost in play, youth in the pleasures of the body, old age leaves one helpless and careworn. Therefore, take heed betimes. It is even when you are young that you must give thought to what will be for your lasting good.

"Vishnu is our sure *bandhu*. He alone can dower us with salvation. Just *think* of Him for a while; that is all what you need to do. Remembered, He hastens to you to save you. Meditate on Him day and night; all your sins will be washed off. Think of Him who resides in everything in the world, and all your sorrows will vanish.

"The whole universe is a manifestation of the Lord. So, look on everything as God Himself. Give up your demoniac nature; strive like me to obtain His grace. Surely you will attain abiding peace.

"Turn your hearts from the enticements of the world. Look upon all things with an equal eye. Worship of Achyuta alone makes for such *samatva*. When He is pleased, what is there which you cannot acquire? But these worldly goods, *dharma, artha* and *kama* are trifling before the final and supreme good of liberation from *samsara*. Devotion to Hari is the only way to achieve it."

The teachers were faced with a dreadful dilemma. Obviously they could not wean Prahlada from his devotion to his God and if they did not, they would have to face the wrath of the demoniac Hiranyakasipu. But they had no choice now and led the boy to the palace and told the King that all their efforts had failed.

Hiranyakasipu flew into a rage as they had feared. He called his servants and said: "Here is my son who preaches against me. Kill him this instant. Do not tarry. Mix the most deadly poison with his food and make him eat it. Do not show him any mercy."

They did as they were bidden and gave the poisoned food to Prahlada. He received it from their hands with great composure. He pronounced the name of Ananta and sanctified the food and ate it. His countenance showed no change. Nothing untoward happened to him.

The servants were filled with dismay and alarm. They reported to the King: "The most deadly poison was given to your son mixed with food; but he ate it all without any harm".

"Quick, quick," cried Hiranyakasipu; "bid the masters of the black art come here at once and let them practise it against him."

The magicians came. But before they set about their mission, they tried to plead with the boy;

"Prahlada, why are you so stubborn? Your father is the lord of the three worlds. You are well-born. Why do you worship other gods? Your father is greater than them all. And, in your time, you too will be like him. So give up this allegiance to his enemies. A father must be worshipped over all others. He is the highest *guru*."

Prahlada said: "Good Sirs, true, ours is a noble family. I know the might and power of my father. And I agree the father is the best of all *gurus* and deserves every respect. A son must certainly take special pains to please his father. I am sure I have not failed in this duty. But when you ask me, 'what have you to do with Ananta?' there I say you speak as you must not." With that Prahlada remained silent.

The magicians smiled and asked: "What can your Ananta do?"

"You ask me what Ananta can do? What is it that Ananta cannot do? *Dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha* are spoken of as the great *purushaarthas*. It is these that every man should strive for. Do you know from whom they are obtained? These four flow by Ananta's grace. In brief, my Ananta is the Lord of the universe. He can do, undo, or destroy. He dwells in the heart of each one of us. He is the enjoyer and the thing enjoyed. He is the God supreme over all. I am but a boy; forgive me for presuming to teach you."

"Beware, Prahlada," they warned, "if you persist in your praise of Hari we shall put an end to your life."

"Who kills whom, dear Sirs, and who protects whom? It is the self that kills or saves, doing evil or doing good. Everything is born of *karma;* good *karma* alone is the means to prosperity. Therefore one should always do what is good."

The black magicians got angry. They raised a fire and out of it came a demon who flew at Prahlada thrusting the sharp point of his weapon at Prahlada's chest. But it left no mark on him. Instead, it recoiled and snapped into a hundred splinters. What weapon can pierce a heart which treasures Hari the Lord of all? In a rage the demon turned on the men who had called him forth and killed them all.

Prahlada prayed to God: "O Thou, who is all this world! Save these poor men who did only what their King bade them do. By the truth that Thou art immanent in all that there is in this world, I pray to Thee, may these men come back to life! I bear no enmity even to my enemies; for I know Thou art in them all. Those who came to kill me, those who threw me into the fire, those who goaded the elephants against me, those who cast me amidst serpents, those who gave me poison—all these I look upon with a friendly eye. I see no evil in them. And so, I pray, may no mishap befall them! Let them all live."

God granted Prahlada's prayer. The men came back to life and blessed him. They went to the King and reported all that befell them.

Hiranyakasipu sent for his son. "Prahlada," said he, "what is this that you have done? How did you accomplish it? Is it the effect of the *mantras* that you have learnt or is it a natural gift?"

Prahlada bent low before his father and replied: "Father, this is the effect of no *mantra,* nor was I born with this power. This power, father, if you choose to call it so, is natural to those whose heart rests for ever in Hari. He sins who does not think of the ills of others as his own. To think, to speak or to do evil to others recoils on oneself. I refrain from all evil to my fellow creatures in thought, word or act; for I worship in my heart the Lord who resides in all creatures. Knowing that Hari is present everywhere and in everything, the wise man will do nought but good to others."

Hiranyakasipu could not stand this speech of his son any longer. "Throw him down a precipice," he commanded, "let his limbs be crushed to pieces on the stones beneath."

Then they took Prahlada to the top of a tall cliff and hurled him down from that dizzy height. As he rolled down the cliff, he held his arm across his chest padding his heart with his palm so that the God seated in it might not be hurt by his fall. As he reached the ground below, mother earth received him gently on her bosom for the sake of the Kesava whom he carried within himself.

Defeated again in his purpose to bring about his son's death, Hiranyakasipu desperately called for the teachers to take him back and to exercise all their power to erase all thought of Hari from the boy's mind. Prahlada returned to his father after staying with his teachers for a while.

Hiranyakasipu began to test him about what he had learnt. "Tell me, my boy," said he, "how should one deal with one's friends, and how with one's foes?"

Prahlada bowed to his father with due humility and replied:

"Father, my teachers spoke to me of four ways of dealing with men. They called them *saama, daana, bheda* and *danda*. These are said to be means to convert or conquer an enemy. But, in my view, they are all unnecessary. For, to my mind, no one is an enemy. My Jagannatha is all-pervasive. He resides in all things, living and lifeless. Then, how can any one in whom my Govinda resides, be my enemy? The distinction of friend and foe loses its meaning, does it not?"

"Where is your God? Show him to me this instant, or, you die"—roared Hiranyakasipu.

"Do you wish to know where my God exists? He is in *you*, father. He is in me. He is in all things. He is *everywhere*."

Hiranyakasipu broke forth in rage, "Surely, you wish to die and you shall die for your insolence. Is there a lord to this universe other than me? You say he is everywhere? Is he here? Is he in this pillar?"

"Aye, father, my Govinda is even in this pillar."

Hiranyakasipu sprang from his seat. Sword in hand, he rushed to the pillar and knocked it with his fist with tremendous force.

The pillar crashed with a terrific sound which rocked the whole universe. *Devas* and *asuras*, men and beasts, all trembled in unconcealed fright. It looked as if it was the end of the worlds.

To show that what His *bhakta* spoke was the very truth, and to affirm his presence in every particle of the universe, the Lord appeared through the cleft pillar assuming a weird form.

There arose a Being who was neither beast nor man. Its aspect was terrible with dazzling hair and leonine manes on the neck. Its eyes shot fire. Its teeth were sharp and fearsome and its tongue leaped out like a fearsome sword. Its body touched the very sky and it had numberless arms. Hiranyakasipu shuddered to his roots at the sight of this Man-lion; yet he quickly mustered courage and tried to charge his foe with his sword.

Narasimha, in which form God had appeared at the moment, lifted the demon from where he stood, dragged him to the threshold of the hall and seating Himself there, threw him on His lap, and in that twilight hour of the day, plunged His nails into his stomach, pulled out his entrails and sent him to his doom.

Thus was fulfilled the promise that Hiranyakasipu had obtained from Brahma. No man or beast killed him, but the two in one. He died neither inside nor outside, but on the doorstep; neither on earth nor in the sky, but midway on Narasimha's lap; neither by day nor by night, but at the twilight hour; neither by the living nor by the dead, but pierced by the nails of his enemy's hands.

Brahma and all who lived in the three worlds stood in awe and fear before the dread form of Narasimha and sang in praise of Him. They begged Him to resume His *saatvic* form.

God turned to Prahlada and blessed him with His gracious glance. Prahlada too sang His praises with heart and soul, feasting his eyes on the grim grandeur of his Lord. Pleased with His devotee, Narasimha bade him ask for whatever he wished. Prahlada prayed that his father might be saved from damnation and might be vouchsafed a happy future. Upon that being granted, the God told him to ask a boon for himself. Prahlada prayed:

नाथ योनिसहस्रेषु येषु येषु व्रजाम्यहम् ।
तेषु तेष्वच्युता भक्तिरच्युताऽस्तु सदा त्वयि ॥
या प्रीतिरविवेकानां विषयेष्वनपायिनी ।
त्वामनुस्मरतः सा मे हृदयान्मापसर्पतु ॥

Even if I have to come out of thousands of wombs in the future and have to be born again and again, in all those lives, my Lord, may my mind be firmly anchored in Thee for ever and for ever.

May I long for You, my Lord, without a break, and as intensely and eagerly as the ignorant are drawn to the pleasure of their senses. May that longing never disappear from my heart while my mind always dwells in Thee".

"So be it," said the Lord and vanished.

[From *Srimad Bhagavata* and *Sri Vishnu Purana*]

19. THE TERRIBLE RESOLVE

In Hastinapura, there was once a great king called Santanu. He was wise and powerful. He ruled over his subjects following the lofty code of *dharma*. The people were very happy under him. Every one was intent on the performance of his duty. He was like a father to them all.

As usual with kings of those days, he used to go to the forests to hunt the wild beasts which were molesting his subjects. One day he went on such an expedition near the banks of the Ganga. Separated from his retinue, he was walking near the river. There he saw a maiden of surpassing beauty. She was perfect in every feature. Her person was decked with the most dazzling jewellery. She was clad in a raiment which showed her off to perfection. The King stood rooted to the spot, gazing at her loveliness.

The maiden looked at the King with bashful eyes. Santanu approached her and asked, "Fair one, are you a goddess of the sky or are you a mortal of the earth? Whoever you are, deign to be my wife. I am Santanu, King of Hastinapura."

She smiled and replied, "Noble King, I agree to be your queen, but on one condition. Neither you nor any one else should question me as to whatever I am pleased to do, be it right or wrong. No one should cross me or reprove me. If you agree to this, I shall marry you and live with you. If, when I am with you, you break this pact, that moment I leave."

Santanu agreed to her condition. He took her in his chariot and hastened to his capital. They lived together happily. He was pleased with her attentions and she too lavished her love and affection on him. They lost count of the days, months and years in the enjoyment of their felicity.

In due time, his new wife bore the King a child. The King was happy. As soon as the news was broken to him, he hastened to her chamber wishing to feast his eyes on the new-born child. But to his dismay, he was told that the queen had gone to the river with the child in her arms. He ran to the river and there, horror of horrors! he saw her fling the infant into the river, and it quickly disappeared in the current.

Santanu stood transfixed to the ground. He wanted to demand of her an explanation for this devilish act. But he remembered the pact that she had made with him. Bewildered, in impotent rage and woe-begone, he returned to the palace.

Some time later another child was born. The queen did the same with that infant too. The King could not question her. This happened seven times. Every time a child was born, she immediately consigned it to the waters and returned to the palace. The King had to accept this horrible state of affairs helplessly, nursing his great grief. He could not attempt to stop it lest his wife should abandon him and go away.

Then an eighth child was born. Santanu was now determined not to permit the same fate to overtake this child too. As the queen was lifting the infant to carry it to the river, he exclaimed, "Pray, do not kill this sweet infant! Who are you, really, who so mercilessly kills these, your own children? Why do you commit this terrible sin?"

Interrupted in her purpose, the queen stood for a while. She then spoke to the King and said: "Now that you so eagerly desire your son to live, be it so. But know, that by your act, you have terminated the period of my sojourn with you. Know me to be Ganga. I came to the world in this form to fulfil a divine destiny. These children that I bore you are the eight *vasus* cursed to be born on earth by Sage Vasistha himself. None is fit to be their father better than you; and no womb can be better than mine to bear them ere they are delivered into the world.

"It had been ordained that they should be released from the travails of mortal life the moment they were born. That is why I drowned the seven of them in the river soon after their birth. This child, the eighth, I spare for you. He shall attain a renown beyond the reach of other men and better than you; and no womb can be better than mine to you after he has grown a few years."

With these words, Ganga vanished from that spot taking the infant with her.

Santanu returned to his palace perplexed and sad at heart.

A few years later, as Santanu went on a hunting expedition and came to the river, he was surprised to find that, though it was the season for floods, the river-bed was completely dry. He became curious. He looked about and saw a pretty boy playing with his arrows. He had made such a perfect network of criss-crossing arrows that it had dammed the river completely and did not let even a drop to ooze through. The King stood in amazement. He could not know that it was his own son.

The boy disappeared from the spot; but soon he reappeared led by his mother Ganga. Addressing the King, Ganga said:

"This, King, is your eighth child whom I bore. He has grown into a mighty lad of great prowess. He is an expert archer and is renowned among all who wield the bow and arrow. He shall be called Devavrata and Gaangeya. Take him by the hand and lead him to your palace."

Handing over her son to the King, Ganga vanished again. Prince Gaangeya lived with Santanu and won the love and affection of all the subjects of the kingdom.

A few years passed. Santanu was again out hunting. This time, he went to the bank of the Yamuna. As he reached there, the air seemed to be filled with a divine fragrance. Eager to find its source, he went about in quest of it. Soon, he discovered that it came from a maiden of exquisite beauty. She looked like a goddess walking the earth.

He went near her and queried: "Whose daughter are you, fair one? Who are you? What are you doing here?"

She replied: "I am a fisherwoman and I roam about here doing my father's bidding. He is the chief of the fishermen."

To Santanu it was again love at first sight. He could not take his eyes off her. He wished to marry her. He quickly went in search of the girl's father. Seeing him, the King asked for his daughter's hand.

The fisherman heard what the King said and replied calmly: "If you are so eager to marry my daughter and make her your *dharmapatni*, I must first secure a promise from you."

"Tell me, quick, what I should do to obtain your daughter and it shall be done." said the King.

"It is this— the son born to my daughter should be crowned King after you."

The King heard this demand. He was stunned. He could not promise that, because Devavrata, his first son would naturally inherit his kingdom upon his death. As a just king, he could not agree to this demand although he wanted the girl so very much.

And so, sad at heart, his thoughts resting on the fragrant maiden, he returned to his palace. He became lovesick and cheerless.

Devavrata noticed the change in his father and anxiously inquired for the cause. Santanu could not muster courage to tell his son the cause of his woe. Upon his insistence, however, the King went about it in a veiled manner and said:

"My child, you are my only son. I am concerned about your life and longevity. I am worried about the continuity of my line if, God forbid, something happens to you. The wise say that to have an only son is like being without an offspring. Being one-eyed and having an only son are like having no eye or having no son. You are brave and intent on bouts of archery. And I am anxious about the future if perchance you meet your death. My family should not come to an end. This is what makes me unhappy, my son."

Devavrata was a shrewd youth. He saw through his father's words. He hastened to the King's charioteer and said:

"Charioteer, you are my father's friend and companion. What is it in the King's mind? Tell me truly what has transpired and I shall fulfill his desire."

"Your father saw a girl, the daughter of the chief of fishermen and fell in love with her. He asked her father for her hand. But the girl's father would not agree to give his daughter to the King unless he promised to make the son born to her the heir to his kingdom," replied the charioteer.

Devavrata lost no time. At once he went to the place of the fisherman and sought his daughter to be his father's wife. The fisherman received him with due honour and listened to his words. In the midst of his kinsmen assembled there, he said:

"A bride-price ought to be paid if your father wishes to wed my daughter. It is nothing less than his kingdom itself. Her son should become King after your father's death. But you are the first born of Santanu and what shall I say to you on this?"

Devavrata looked at the fisherman. He looked at the assembly of his kinsmen. He looked at the girl and then said:

"Listen, all ye, to my words. Yes; it shall be even as you wish. The son born to your daughter will be the King after my father's death. I give up my right to the throne."

"Great is your promise, Prince; and it is befitting your nobility and greatness. Yet a doubt assails my mind. It arises from my affection for my daughter. Do not mistake me. You may resign your right to the throne in favour of my daughter's child. But, then you may beget a son in due time. Would he honour your promise to make my grandchild heir to your father's kingdom?"

Devavrata saw the force of the fisherman's question. And then and there he proclaimed aloud in the hearing of gods and men:

"Listen, let the *rishis* and *devas*, let all denizens of the earth, air and sky bear witness. This is Devavrata making a great resolve. King of fishermen, listen to what I now declare. Already, to make my father happy, I have renounced my kingdom. And now for the sake of your daughter's son, I proclaim that from this moment I shall observe the vow of celibacy. I shall not take a wife. I shall live a *brahmachari* to the end of my days.

"May it be granted that I do not come to grief in the next world for being sonless. I shall stick to this resolve. Never have I spoken an untruth nor broken a promise. So long as there is breath in my body, I shall not beget a child. Once for all, here and now I relinquish my right to the throne and forswear connection with any woman. I shall be an *oordhva retas,* controlling and sublimating my passion. And now, Sir, are you satisfied? Will you give your daughter in marriage to my father?"

The fisherman was glad and he consented to the King's desire to wed his daughter. All those who had assembled there and others who watched from the sky were amazed. Flowers rained on Devavrata's head and in appreciation of the severity and strength of his resolve, every one acclaimed him, "You are verily Bhishma, of terrible resolve, you shall be known as Bhishma henceforward."

Then, turning to the maiden, the Prince said, "Mother, deign to get into this chariot; let us go to your palace."

The two quickly reached Hastinapura and Bhishma presented her to King. The whole city celebrated the wedding while every tongue spoke in praise of Bhishma's *pratijna* and his great sacrifice.

And yet, the King was sad that his son had been constrained to abjure the throne and accept celibacy for life. As a recompense, he gave him a boon that he would die only when he chose to do so and that he might live as long as he pleased. "Death shall come to you," said the King, "only after obtaining your permission."

[From the *Mahabharata*]

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